

JOHN HALIFAX, GENTLEMAN

Mrs. Henry Craik



A shortened version prepared by
H. OLDFIELD BOX
whose B.B.C. serial of this famous novel
enthralled millions of listeners

For almost a century

JOHN HALIFAX, GENTLEMAN

has been one of the most persistently popular of English Novels.

Here, H. Oldfield Box retells the story in a shorter version, preserving the main incidents and general structure, but boldly and skillfully removing much of the sentimentality and moralising which have no appeal for readers to-day.

Old acquaintances of John Halifax, and those who met him for the first time in the recent B.B.C. serial version, will be equally delighted to meet him again.

And this adaptation, which was used for the B.B.C. serial, will win for him a wide circle of new friends and admirers.

Page
104.

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116

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A shortened version
prepared by
H. Oldfield Box

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INTRODUCTION

by H. OLDFIELD BOX

John Halifax—Gentleman is, like many Victorian novels, a book with a moral—briefly, that it is character and integrity which make a gentleman, not birth and breeding. But it survives (and, indeed, remains one of the most persistently popular of English novels) for the simple and sufficient reason that it tells a good story, and tells it remarkably well.

It has its faults—and they are not hard to discover. Its plot is obviously contrived, the end of the tale particularly so. Its sentiment is sometimes inclined to cloy. It shows too little emotional restraint. Its characterization is somewhat superficial. Its hero is a little too good to be credible. The same is true of all the “good” people in the book. There never was, and never could have been, in actual life, such blind and unquestioning devotion as that shown to John Halifax by poor Phineas Fletcher, who tells the tale. The life and death of “blind Muriel” have still power to draw tears to many eyes, but the child’s perfection is a shade too perfect. In a nutshell, the characters are not quite real. They do not correspond with our own observation and experience.

But—and this is a point worth remembering—they do very largely correspond with what we should *like* people to be—and we are soon content to accept them. A sharp line of demarcation between good and evil, and a straight-forward fight between heroism and villainy, are, after all, well-trying and effective devices in story-telling. They are used, time and time again, in many grand tales which we still read with pleasure, many centuries after they were first written.

The present story begins in the closing years of the eighteenth century, and takes us into the early decades of the nineteenth. A ragged, starving orphan boy is discovered by the crippled Phineas Fletcher, taking refuge from the rain in

an alley in "Norton Bury" (really Tewkesbury). Phineas, whose own fifteen years have been spent in loneliness, sickness and pain, often bedridden, takes an immediate fancy to the boy, persuades his father, Abel Fletcher, the tanner, to give him employment—and from that moment the fortunes of the two boys are linked together. Phineas's life is lived *in* that of his friend, and from him we learn how John Halifax gradually overcomes his early disadvantages of poverty and no education—marries a lady of birth, raises a family, and battles his way through to prosperity and influence—but never forgetting his own humble origin, and never losing his sympathy for the poor and oppressed.

Many contemporary events are cleverly welded into the tale. We have a glimpse of the great Mrs. Siddons (playing Lady Macbeth) when John and Phineas make that journey to "Coltham" (Cheltenham) which was to have such an unhappy ending. John succeeds in quelling a bread riot at "Norton Bury", in that year of famine and riots, 1800. One of the best scenes in the book gives us a very lively glimpse of a Parliamentary election at one of those "rotten boroughs" which existed before the first Reform Bill was passed—an election in which John plays an unexpected and triumphant part. Another memorable incident is the run on Jessop's Bank at "Norton Bury", 1825, the year which brought the frenzied speculation which had succeeded the Napoleonic wars to an abrupt halt, forced many banks to close their doors, and caused widespread ruin. These events—and others in which John takes a prominent part—are not dragged awkwardly into the story. Every one fits neatly into the plot, and is made to bear on John's private fortunes. The plot may be contrived, but it is very neatly contrived.

In this shortened version the book is reduced to approximately one third of its original length and most of the moralizing and sentimentality which are repugnant to present tastes have been eliminated. But the main incidents and general structure of the story are preserved.

John Halifax was first published in 1857. Its author, Mrs.

Craik (then Miss Mulock) was at the time thirty-one years old. Born at Stoke-on-Trent, in 1826, she was the daughter of a somewhat eccentric Nonconformist minister, whose fortunes were always unsettled. Despite this his daughter managed by various means to secure a good education, and when she was twenty years old, feeling that she had a vocation for authorship, she came to London, determined to make her living by her pen.

She soon established herself as a writer of stories for children, for whom, indeed, a very large proportion of her fifty or so books were written. But she wrote about twenty adult novels, several of which became very popular—though none achieved the great success of *John Halifax*. A woman of generous heart and considerable personal attractiveness, she made many friends. *John Halifax* placed her in the front rank of contemporary women novelists, and after its publication she took a cottage at Hampstead, where she soon became the centre of a large social circle.

In 1864, she married Mr. G. L. Craik, a partner in Macmillan's the publishers. With him she moved to Shortlands in Kent, where the rest of her life was passed in quiet happiness and literary industry.

A pension of £60 a year, which was granted to her in the year of her marriage, was set aside for the use of less fortunate authors.

A serial adaptation of *John Halifax* which I made for the B.B.C. was broadcast in 1947, with Howard Marion Crawford in the title role, and Harold Scott as Phineas Fletcher.

CHAPTER I

"GET out o' Mr. Fletcher's road, ye idle, lounging little——"

"Vagabond," I think the woman (Sally Watkins, once my nurse) was going to say, but she changed her mind.

My father and I both glanced at her, surprised at such unusual reticence, but when the lad addressed fixed his eyes on each of us for a moment, and made way, we ceased to wonder. Ragged, muddy, and miserable as he was, he was anything but a vagabond.

"Thee need not go into the wet, my lad. Keep close to the wall, and there will be shelter enough for both us and thee," said my father, as he pulled my little hand-carriage into the narrow alley, under cover from the pelting rain. The boy, with a grateful look, put out a hand likewise and pushed me further in. A strong hand—roughened and browned with labour—though he was scarcely as old as I. What would I—poor, puny creature that I was—have not given to be so stalwart and so tall?

Sally called to us from her house door, "Wouldn't Master Phineas like to come in for a bit?" But it was always a trouble to me to move or walk; besides I wanted to look again at the stranger.

He had scarcely stirred, but remained leaning against the wall—either through weariness, or in order to be out of our way. He took no notice of us, but kept his eyes fixed on the pavement—for we actually boasted pavements in the High Street of our town of Norton Bury—watching the eddying raindrops as they fell. It was a serious, haggard face for a boy of fourteen or so. I can remember it easily, even after more than fifty years;—brown eyes, deep sunken, strongly-marked brows; firm lips, well-shaped; a square, sharply outlined, resolute chin.

The driving autumn shower continued. My father began

to grow restless for he was impatient to be back at his tanyard. He pulled out his great silver watch. "Twenty-three minutes lost by this shower, Phineas, my son, how am I to get thee safe home? Unless thee will go with me to the tanyard?" (A very orthodox member of the Society of Friends, my father always used this "second person singular" form of address).

I shook my head. It was very hard for Abel Fletcher, a man as strong in body as he was firm and unbending in character, to have such a weak, sickly son as I. I was sixteen, but I was as useless to him as a baby.

"Well, well, I must find someone to go home with thee." He raised his voice. "Here, Sally—Sally Watkins! Do any of thy lads want to earn an honest penny?"

Sally was out of earshot; but I noticed the colour rush to the cheeks of the lad near us, and he started forward involuntarily. I had not perceived before how wasted and hungry-looking he was.

"Father," I whispered. But here the boy had mustered up his courage and voice.

"Sir, I want work; may I earn a penny?"

He spoke in tolerably good English—different from our coarse, broad G—shire drawl; and taking off his tattered cap, he looked right up into my father's face. The old man scanned him closely.

"What is thy name, lad?"

"John Halifax."

"Where does thee come from?"

"Cornwall."

"Has thee any parents living?"

"No."

I wished my father would not question thus; but possibly he had his own motives, which were rarely harsh, though his actions often appeared so.

"How old might thee be, John Halifax?"

"Fourteen, sir."

"Art thee used to work?"

"Yes."

"What sort of work?"

"Anything I can get."

"Well," said my father, after a pause, "thee shall take my son home, and I'll give thee a groat. But first tell me this"—and here my father held him at arms' length, and regarded him with eyes that were the terror of all the rogues in Norton Bury—"art thee a lad to be trusted?"

John Halifax neither answered nor declined his eyes. He seemed to feel that this was a critical moment, and to have gathered all his mental forces into a serried square, to meet the attack. He met it, and conquered in silence.

"Shall I give thee the groat now?" my father asked, holding out the coin.

"Not till I've earned it, sir."

So, drawing his hand back, my father slipped the money into mine, and left us. I followed him with my eyes, as he went sturdily down the street; his broad, comfortable back, which owned a coat of the true Quaker cut, but spotless, warm, and fine; his ribbed hose and leathern gaiters, and the wide-brimmed hat set over a frame of grey hair that crowned the whole with respectable dignity. He looked precisely what he was—an honest, honourable, prosperous tradesman. I watched him down the street—my good father, whom I respected perhaps more than I loved him. The Cornish lad watched him likewise.

The rain had by now slackened, but it had not ceased, so we remained under cover. John Halifax stood in silence. Only once, when the draught through the alley made me shiver, he pulled my cloak round me carefully.

"You are not very strong, I'm afraid?"

"No. I have been an invalid all my life."

Then he stood, idly looking out across the road at the imposing house opposite—the mayor's house—with its steps and portico, and its fourteen windows, one of which was open, and a cluster of little heads visible there. They were the mayor's children, and they seemed greatly amused by watching us shivering shelterers from the rain.

Suddenly another head came to the window, a somewhat older child. I had not seen her before; apparently she was only a visitor. She looked at us, then disappeared. Soon after we saw the front door half opened, and an evident struggle taking place behind it; we even heard loud words across the narrow street.

"I will—I say I will!"

"You shan't, Miss Ursula."

"But I will."

And there stood the little girl, with a loaf in one hand, and a carving-knife in the other. She succeeded in cutting off a large slice and holding it out.

"Take it, poor boy—you look so hungry. Do take it." But the servant forced her in, and the door was shut upon a sharp cry of pain.

It made John Halifax start. We heard nothing more. The window was closed. After a minute he crossed the street and picked up the slice of bread. In those days wheaten bread was precious, exceedingly. The poor folk rarely got it; they lived on rye or meal. The boy eyed it ravenously. Then, glancing at the shut door, his mind seemed to change. He was a long time before he ate a morsel; when he did so, it was quietly and thoughtfully, looking very grave all the while.

As soon as the rain ceased, we took our way home, down the High Street, towards the Abbey Church, he guiding my carriage in silence. I wished he would talk, and let me hear again his pleasant Cornish accent.

"How strong you are!" said I, sighing, when, with a sudden pull, he had saved me from being overturned by a horseman riding by—young Mr. Brithwood of the Mythe House, who never cared where he galloped or whom he hurt—"I wish I were so strong and tall."

"I shall need all my strength."

"How?"

"To earn my living."

He drew up his broad shoulders, and planted on the pavement a firmer foot, as if he knew he had the world

before him—would meet it single-handed, and without fear.

“What have you worked at lately?”

“Anything I could get, for I have never learned a trade.”

“Would you like to learn one?”

He hesitated, as if weighing his speech. “Once I thought I should like to be what my father was.”

“What was he?”

“A scholar and a gentleman.”

That was news, though it did not surprise me, for I had already detected in my companion a mind and breeding beyond his outward condition.

“Would you like to follow a trade?”

“Yes, I should. What would it matter to me? My father was a gentleman.”

“And your mother?”

He turned suddenly round; his cheeks hot, his lips quivering: “She is dead. I do not like to hear strangers speak about my mother.”

I asked his pardon. It was plain he had loved and mourned her. Then, after a pause, I added. “I wish that we were not strangers.”

“Do you?” The lad’s half-amazed, half-gratified smile went straight to my heart.

“Have you been up and down the country much?”

“A great deal—these last three years; doing a hand’s turn as best I could in hop-picking, apple-gathering, harvesting; only this summer I had typhus fever, and could not work.”

“What did you do then?”

“I lay in a barn till I got well. I’m quite well now; you need not be afraid.”

“No, indeed; I had never thought of that.”

We soon became sociable together. He guided me carefully out of the town into the Abbey Walk, flecked with sunshine through the overhanging trees. Once he stopped to pick up for me the large brown fan of a horse-chestnut leaf.

“It’s pretty, isn’t it?—only it shows that autumn has come.”

"And how shall you live in the winter, when there is no out-of-doors work to be had?"

"I don't know." The lad's countenance fell, and that hungry, weary look, which had vanished while we talked, returned more painfully than ever. I reproached myself for having, under the influence of his merry talk, temporarily forgotten it.

"Ah!" I cried eagerly, when we left the shade of the Abbey trees, and crossed the street; "here we are, at home."

"Are you?" The homeless lad just glanced at it—the flight of spotless steps, guarded by ponderous railings, which led to my father's respectable and handsome door. "Good-day, then—which means good-bye."

I started. The word pained me. Into my sad, lonely life, the lad's face had come like a flash of sunshine. To let him go would be like going back into the dark.

"Not good-bye just yet!" said I, trying painfully to disengage myself from my little carriage and mount the steps. John Halifax came to my aid.

"Suppose you let me carry you. I could—and—it would be great fun, you know."

He tried to turn it into a jest, so as not to hurt me. I put my arms round his neck; he lifted me carefully, and set me at my own door. Then with another good-bye he again turned to go.

My heart cried after him with an irrepressible cry. What I said I do not remember; but it caused him to return.

"Is there anything more I can do for you, sir?"

"Don't call me 'sir'; I am only a boy like yourself. I want you; don't go yet. Ah! here comes my father."

John Halifax stood aside, and touched his cap with respectful deference as the old man came up.

"So here thee be—hast thee taken care of my son? Did he give thee thy groat, my lad?"

We had neither of us thought of the money!

When I acknowledged this my father laughed, called John an honest lad, and began searching in his pocket for

some larger coin. But John Halifax was already going away.

"Stop, lad—here is thy groat, and a shilling added for being kind to my son."

"Thank you, but I don't want payment for kindness." He kept the groat and put the shilling back into my father's hand.

"Eh!" said the old man, much astonished, "thee'st an odd lad; but I can't stay talking with thee.—Come in to dinner, Phineas.—I say," turning back to John Halifax with a sudden thought; "art thee hungry?"

"Very hungry." Nature gave way at last, and great tears came into the poor lad's eyes. "Nearly starving."

"Bless me! then get in, and have thy dinner. But first"—and my inexorable father held him by the shoulders—"thee art a decent lad, come of decent parents?"

"Yes," almost indignantly.

"Thee works for thy living?"

"I do, whenever I can get it."

"Thee hast never been in jail?"

"No!" thundered out the lad with a furious look. "I don't want your dinner, sir; I would have stayed, because your son asked me, and he was civil to me, and I liked him. Now I think I had better go. Good-day."

But I caught him by the hand, and would not let him go.

"There, get in, lads—make no more ado," said Abel Fletcher sharply.

So, still holding the lad fast by the hand, I brought him into my father's house.

CHAPTER II

DINNER was over; my father and I took ours alone together; I had not dared to bring the poor wandering lad into the dining-room. But as soon as my father had returned to the tanyard I sent for John.

Jael brought him in; Jael the only womankind we ever had about us, and who, save to me when I happened to be very ill, certainly gave no indication of her sex in its softness and tenderness. There had evidently been wrath in the kitchen.

"Phineas, the lad ha' got his dinner, and you mustn't keep 'un long," she said sternly. "I bean't going to let you knock yourself up with looking after a beggar boy."

A beggar boy! The idea seemed so ludicrous that I could not help smiling at it as I regarded him. He had washed his hair and combed out his fair curls, and now that the sickness of hunger had gone from his face, the contrast between the ragged clothes and the lad inside them was more marked than ever. Beggar boy, indeed! I hoped he had not heard Jael's remark. But he had.

"Madam," said he, with a bow of perfect good-humour, and even some of drollery, "you mistake; I never begged in my life: I am a person of independent property, which consists of my head and my two hands, out of which I hope to realize a large capital some day."

I laughed. Jael retired, abundantly mystified, and rather cross. John Halifax came to my easy-chair, and in an altered tone asked how I felt, and if he could do anything for me before he went away.

"You're not going away; not till my father comes home at least."

My entreaty was so earnest that it apparently touched the friendless boy to the core. "Thank you," he said in an un-

steady voice, as leaning against the fireplace he drew his hand backwards and forwards across his face; "you are very kind; I'll stay for an hour or so if you wish it."

"Then come and sit down here, and let us have a talk."

What this talk was I cannot now recall, save that it ranged over many and wide themes, such as boys delight in—chiefly of life and adventure. He knew nothing of my only world—books.

"Can you read?" he asked me at last suddenly.

"And write?"

"Oh, yes, certainly."

"I wish I could." He hesitated and then added in a low tone, "Would you put something down in a book for me?"

I agreed readily, and he took out of his pocket a little case of leather. From this he drew out a small book. I saw that it was a Greek Testament.

"Look here."

Still holding the book in his own hands, he pointed to the flyleaf, and I read:

"Guy Halifax, his book.

"Guy Halifax, gentleman, married Muriel Joyce, spinster, May 17th, 1779.

"John Halifax, their son, born June 18th, 1780."

There was one more entry, in a feeble, illiterate female hand—"Guy Halifax, died January 4th, 1781."

"What shall I write, John?" I asked.

"Write—'Muriel Halifax, died January 1st, 1791.'"

I did as he asked. He looked at the writing for a minute or two, dried it carefully by the fire, replaced the book in its case, and put it into his pocket. "Thank you," he said. I asked him no questions, and that was all I ever heard of his parentage.

Jael kept coming in and out of the parlour on divers excuses, eyeing very suspiciously John Halifax and me; especially when she heard me laughing—a rare thing for me—for mirth was not the fashion in our house. But this lad, hardly as the world had knocked him about, had an overflowing spirit of

quiet drollery, which to me was an inexpressible relief. I could not look at his lively face and brown dancing eyes without feeling cheered and delighted.

"Phineas," said Jael—entering for the sixth or seventh time—"it's fine and sunny now: thee ought to be out in the garden."

Her plan of course was to get rid of John Halifax, and this scheme I defeated by asking him to accompany me outside. As I reached for my crutches he regarded me with a grave, pitying look.

"You don't need these sort of things," I said, making a pretence to laugh, for I felt ashamed of my infirmity.

"I hope *you* will not need them always."

"Perhaps not—Dr. Jessop isn't sure. But it doesn't matter much; most likely I shan't live long." For this was, God forgive me, always the last and greatest comfort I had.

John looked at me—surprised, troubled, compassionate—but he did not say a word. I hobbled past him; he following through the long passage to the garden door. There I paused, tired out. He took gentle hold of my shoulder.

"I think, if you did not mind, I'm sure I could carry you. I carried a meal sack once, weighing eight stones."

I burst out laughing, which maybe was what he wanted, and forthwith consented to assume the place of the meal sack. With no effort at all, he took me on his back, and, following my instructions, carried me to the clematis arbour at the bottom of my father's beautiful old garden. This arbour overlooked the river Avon. "I often come here in fine weather," I told him, as I sat down.

"It is a nice place." He looked across the river at the wide green level called the Ham. It was dotted with pasturing cattle of all sorts. Beyond it was a second river, forming an arch of a circle round the verdant flat. But the second stream lay so low as to be invisible from where we sat: you could only trace the line of its course by the small white sails that glided in and out, oddly-enough, from behind clumps of trees, and across meadow-lands.

They attracted John's attention. "Those can't be boats, surely. Is there water there?"

"To be sure, or you would not see the sails. It is the broad Severn itself."

"I've seen that!" cried John, with a bright look. "Ah, I like the Severn."

He stood gazing towards it for a good while with glowing eyes. Then suddenly the Abbey chimes burst out, and made him start.

"What's that?"

I pointed to where, beyond our tall garden wall, and the invisible high ground that interposed, rose the grim old Abbey tower.

"Probably this garden belonged to the Abbey in ancient time—our orchard is so fine. The monks may have planted it; they liked fruit, those old fellows."

"Oh, did they?" He evidently did not quite comprehend, but was trying, without asking, to find out what I referred to. I was almost ashamed, lest he might think I wanted to show off my superior knowledge.

"The monks were parsons, John, you know. Very good men, I dare say, but rather idle."

"Oh, indeed." He pointed to the thick old yew hedge that bounded one side of the garden. "Do you think they planted that?" He went to examine it.

Our yew tree was noted far and near; there was not its like in the whole county. It was about fifteen feet high, and as many thick. Century after century of growth, with careful clipping and training, had compacted it into a massive green barrier, as close and impervious as a wall.

John poked about it—peering through every interstice—leaning his breast against the solid depth of the branches; but their close shield resisted all his strength. At last he came back, his face glowing with the efforts he had made.

"What were you about? Did you want to get through?"

"I wanted just to see if it were possible."

I shook my head. "What would you do, John, if you were

shut up here, and had to get over the yew hedge? You could not climb it."

"I know that, and, therefore, should not waste time trying."

"Would you give up then?"

He smiled—there was no "giving up" in that smile of his. "No, I'd break it, twig by twig, till I forced my way through, and got out safe the other side."

"Well done, lad!" cried a familiar voice; "but if it's all the same to thee, I'd rather thee did not try that experiment upon *my* yew hedge at present."

My father had come behind, and overheard us, unobserved. We were somewhat confounded, though his expression showed that he was not displeased—nay, even amused.

"Is that thy usual fashion of getting over a difficulty, lad?" He looked at John keenly, from top to toe—"Didn't thee say thee wanted work? It looks rather like it."

His glance at the shabby clothes made the boy colour violently.

"Oh, thee needst not be ashamed; better men than thee have been in rags. Hast thee any money?"

"Only the groat you gave—that is, paid me; I never take what I don't earn."

"Don't be afraid—I was not going to give thee anything—except maybe—Would thee like some work?"

"Oh, sir!"

"Oh, Father!"

I hardly knew which was the more grateful cry.

Abel Fletcher looked surprised, but on the whole not ill-pleased. My father was a rich man now, but he himself, as I well knew, had first come to Norton Bury without a shilling in his pocket.

"Well, what work canst thee do, lad?"

"Anything," was the eager answer.

"Anything generally means nothing," sharply said my father. "What hast thee been at all this year? The truth mind."

John's eyes flashed, but a look from mine set him right

again. He said quietly and respectfully, "Let me think for a minute, and I'll tell you. All spring I was at a farmer's, riding the plough-horses, hoeing turnips; then I went up to the hills with some sheep; in June I tried haymaking, and caught a fever—you needn't start, sir, I've been well these six weeks, or I wouldn't have come near your son; then——"

"That will do lad—I'm satisfied." He turned to me. "Phineas, one of my men at the tanyard has gone and enlisted this day—left an honest livelihood to be a paid cut-throat." My father, as an earnest Quaker, had a hatred of war and violence. "Now if I could get a lad—one too young to be caught hold of at every pot-house by that man of blood, the recruiting sergeant—— It seems that thee and this lad have gotten to know each other pretty well these past few hours; dost thee think he is fit to take the place?"

"Whose place, Father?"

"Bill Watkins."

I was dumbfounded. Bill Watkins was a dirty, uncouth young man; his business had been to drive round in a cart and collect the bloody skins which my father bought from the farmers round about. The idea of John Halifax in such a position was not agreeable. But before I could voice my own thoughts, John exclaimed: "I will do any work, sir. I don't care what, if only it's honest work."

"Well, I'll take thee." He rose, shook the boy's hand, as a sign that the bargain was concluded, at the same time putting into it a shilling.

"What is this for?"

"To show that I have hired thee as my servant."

"Servant!" John repeated hastily, and rather proudly. "Oh yes, I understand—and I will try to serve thee well."

My father did not notice the manly, self-dependent smile that accompanied these words. He was too busy calculating how many more of those said shillings would be a fair equivalent for such labour as a lad, ever so much the junior of Bill Watkins, could supply. After some cogitation, he hit upon the right sum. I forget how much, but I know it was not

overmuch. John, however, agreed to it without demur, and my father was turning to leave us when a sudden thought struck him. He came back.

"Thee said thee had no money; there's a week in advance, my son being witness I pay it thee; and I can pay thee a shilling less every Saturday till we get it straight. Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon, sir, and thank you."

John took off his cap as he spoke. Abel Fletcher, involuntarily almost, touched his hat in return of the salutation. Then he walked away, leaving the two of us to our joy.

"Hurrah!" shouted John. And I, in my poor quavering voice, shouted too.

CHAPTER III

BUT many days passed after this before I saw John Halifax again—almost before I thought of him again. For there followed one of my seasons of excessive pain, when I found it difficult to think of anything beyond the four grey-painted walls of my own bedroom.

Afterwards, as my pain abated, I began to be haunted by the memory of something pleasant that had crossed my dreary life; visions of a brave, bright young face, ready alike to battle with and enjoy the world. And one day, when Jael was in my room, I asked her if John Halifax had ever called, asking after me.

Jael "thought he had—but wasn't sure. Didn't bother her head about such folk."

"If he comes again, may he be allowed upstairs?"

"No."

I was too weak to combat, and Jael was too strong an adversary. But at last, on a soft bright autumn morning, I was able to break the bonds of sickness, and creep downstairs.

It was market day. Our house was situated on the verge of the town, where Norton Bury melted into the country. Now and again carts and cattle went by along the rural road. I watched them idly as they passed. Then suddenly I sat up. A cart which I knew well by sight was approaching on the other side of the road, with the relics of departed sheep dangling out behind. It was our cart of skins, and John Halifax was driving it.

"John! John!" I called out when he was near enough to hear.

He looked up; a beaming smile of pleasure lit his face as he saw me at the window. Then all at once his manner changed; he took off his cap and bowed ceremoniously to his master's son.

For the moment I was hurt; then I could not but respect his honest pride which thus intimated that he knew his own position, and wished neither to ignore nor alter it; all advances must evidently come from my side.

"John! John!" I called, seeing that he was about to pass on.

"Yes, sir?"

"Stop one minute till I come out to you." I crawled on my crutches to the front door, and opened it. He was standing at the foot of the steps, with the reins on his arm.

"Did you want me?"

"Yes. Come up here; never mind the cart."

But that was not John's way. He gave the reins in charge of a small boy; then he bounded back across the road and was up the steps in a single leap.

"I had no notion of seeing you. They said you were in bed yesterday." (Then he *had* been inquiring for me.) "You should not be standing at the door this cold day."

"It's quite warm."

"Please go in."

"If you'll come too."

He nodded, then put his arm round mine, and helped me in, as if he had been an elder brother, and I an ailing child. True tenderness is only to be found in strong, deep, undemonstrative natures; and John Halifax possessed this quality more than anyone else I ever knew.

"I'm glad you're better," he said, and said no more. But one look of his expressed as much as half a dozen sympathetic sentences of other people.

"And how have you been, John? Do you like the tanyard? Tell me frankly."

He pulled a wry face, though comical withal, and said cheerily, "Everybody must like what brings him his daily bread. It's a grand thing for me not to have been hungry for thirty days."

"Poor John! I have so often wanted to see you. Couldn't you come right in and stay awhile?"

He shook his head and pointed to the cart. And at that

minute, through the open hall door, I perceived Jael, returning from market—Jael, my strict, watchful guardian.

Now, if I was a coward, it was not for myself this time. The avalanche of ill words which must fall should not fall on him.

"Jump on your cart, John. Let me see how well you can drive. There—good-bye for the present. Are you going to the tanyard?"

"Yes—for the rest of the day."

"I'll come and see you there this afternoon."

"No?" with a look of delighted surprise. "But you must not—you ought not."

"But I *will*." And I laughed to hear myself actually using that phrase. What would Jael have said?

What she did say as she arrived just in time to receive a ceremonious, half-malicious bow from John, I cannot remember. I only remember that her sharp words did not frighten me as usual.

My father returned at dinner time to find me waiting in my place at the table. He only said, "Thee art better then, my son?" But I knew he was glad to see me up. He gave token of this by being remarkably conversable during our meal—though his conversation, as was usual with him, had a sternly moral tone. It had reference to an anecdote Dr. Jessop had just been telling him—about a little girl, one of our doctor's patients, who in some passionate struggle had hurt herself very much with a knife.

"Let this be a warning to thee, my son, not to give way to violent passions. For this child—I remember her father well, for he lived at Kingswell here—this miserable child will bear the mark of her wound all her life."

"Poor thing!" I said absently.

"No need to pity her; her spirit is not half broken yet. Thomas Jessop said to me, 'That little Ursula——' "

"Is her name Ursula?" And I called to mind the little girl who tried to give bread to the hungry John Halifax, and whose cry of pain we had heard when the door shut upon her. The next time I saw Dr. Jessop I asked after the child, and

learned that she had been taken away somewhere; and then the whole affair slipped from my memory.

"Father," said I, when he ceased talking.

"Well, my son."

"I should like to go with thee to the tanyard this afternoon."

Jael, who always ate her dinner with us, but "below the salt", fairly gasped with amazement.

"Abel—Abel Fletcher! The lad's only just out of bed! He's no more fit to——"

"Pshaw, woman!" was the sharp retort—"So, Phineas, thee art really strong enough to go out?"

"If thee wilt take me, Father."

He looked pleased, as he always did when I used the Friends' mode of phraseology, for I had not been brought up in the Society—this having been the last request of my mother, rigidly observed by her husband.

"Phineas," said he (after stopping a volley of threats and imprecations from poor Jael), "get thee ready to go, lad. I rejoice to see thy mind turning towards business. I trust, should better health be vouchsafed to thee, that some day soon——"

"Not just yet, Father," said I sadly, for I knew that the hope he still clung to so obstinately—that I might one day join him in his business—could never be fulfilled. Mentally and physically alike I revolted from my father's trade. To enter the tanyard often made me ill for days. It hurt me that my project of going to-day should have deceived him, but I could not disclose my real reason.

A little later we set out, my father marching along in his grave fashion, I steering my little carriage, and keeping as close as I could beside him. Norton Bury is a picturesque old town, but on this occasion I was less struck by its beauties than by the muddiness of its pathways, and the mingled noises of murmuring looms, scolding women, and squabbling children, that came up from the foul, overcrowded alley which lay between the High Street and the Avon. Was John Halifax living amidst all that poverty, in those slums?

My father's tanyard was in an alley, farther' on. Already I perceived its nauseating, familiar odour, as if from a lately forsaken battlefield. I wondered how anyone could endure it—yet some did; and among the workmen, as we entered, I looked round for the lad I knew.

He was sitting in a corner of one of the sheds, helping two or three women to split bark, vëry busy at work. As we passed he did not even see us. I asked my father in a whisper, how he liked the boy.

"What boy? Eh, him? Oh, well enough—there's no harm in him that I know of. Dost thee want him to wheel thee about the yard? Here, I say, lad—bless me! I've forgot thy name."

John Halifax started up at the sharp tone of command; but when he saw me he smiled. My father walked on to examine some hides; I stopped behind.

"John, I want you."

John shook himself free from the bark heap, and came—rather hesitatingly at first.

"Anything I can do for you, sir?"

"Don't call me 'sir'; if I say 'John', why don't you say 'Phineas'?"

And I held out my hand—his was all grimed with bark dust.

"Are you not ashamed to shake hands with me—Phineas?"

"Nonsense, John."

So we settled that point entirely.

He guided me carefully among the tan pits—those deep fosses of abomination, with a slender network of pathways thrown between—till we reached the lower end of the yard. It was bounded by the Avon only—and by a great heap of refuse bark.

"This is not a bad place to rest in." He made me comfortable; and sat down beside me on the bark heap. I remarked that he seemed very much at home there.

"So I am," he answered smiling; "it is my castle—my house. It is on this heap that my nights are spent, Phineas."

My expression showed my consternation.

"Oh," he continued, "it is not unpleasant—except when it rains."

"But it must be dreadfully cold after sunset."

"Rather, sometimes. Are you cold now?" for it was an October afternoon, and he had noticed that I was shivering a little. He rose and muffled my rug closer round me; infinitely light and tender was his rough boy's hand.

"I never saw anyone so thin as you; thinner than when I last saw you. Have you been very ill, Phineas? What ailed you?"

His anxiety was so earnest that I explained to him (what I may as well explain here, and dismiss, once for all), that from my birth I had been puny and diseased, that my life had been a succession of sicknesses, and that I could hope for little else until the end.

"But I don't mind it, John," for I was grieved to see his shocked and troubled look. "I am very content; I have a quiet home, a good father, and now I hope and believe, I have found the one thing I always wanted—a good friend."

I saw that he did not understand me; but I was neither vexed nor hurt. I was already sure of his friendship; only time would be needed to cement it. I changed the subject and asked him again how he liked the tanyard. "Come, John," I said, "give me an honest answer."

He looked at me hard, put both his hands in his pockets, and began to whistle a tune.

"Don't shirk the question, please, John. I want to know the truth."

"Well, then, I hate the tanyard."

Having relieved his mind by this ebullition, and by kicking a small heap of tan right down into the river, he became composed.

"But, Phineas, don't imagine I intend to hate it always; I intend to get used to it. It is wicked to hate what wins one's bread, merely because it is disagreeable. I mean to get on and rise in the world, and that can never be done without hard-ship."

"You are a wise lad for your age, John."

"Now don't be laughing at me." (But I was not; I was in solemn earnest). "And don't think I am worse than I am, and especially that I'm not thankful to your good father for giving me the first lift in the world I ever had. If I get one foot on the ladder, perhaps I may climb."

"I should rather believe so," answered I, very confidently. "But you seem to have thought a good deal about these things."

"Oh, yes! I have plenty of time for thinking, and one's thoughts travel fast enough lying on this bark—farther than indoors. I often wish I could read—that is, read easily. As it is I have nothing to do but to think."

"Suppose, after Dick Whittington's fashion, you should succeed to your master's business, should you like to be a tanner?"

He paused—his truthful face betraying him. Then he said resolutely, "I would like to be anything that was honest and honourable. It's a notion of mine that whatever a man may be, his trade does not make him—he makes his trade. Whether I like it or not, I'll stick to tanning as long as I think I ought."

"That's right; I'm so glad," I said. "Nevertheless it's my opinion, John, that you might be anything you liked."

He laughed. "Questionable that—at least at present. Whatever I may be, at present I am the lad that drives your father's cart, and works in his tanyard—John Halifax, and very much at your service, Mr. Phineas Fletcher."

Half in fun, half in earnest, he uncovered his fair locks, with a bow so contradictory to the rest of his appearance, that I involuntarily recalled the Greek Testament and "Guy Halifax, Gentleman." However, that could be no matter to me, or to him either, now. The lad, like many another, owed nothing to his father but his mere existence.—Heaven knows whether that gift is oftenest a curse or a blessing.

The immediate question, it seemed to me, was how to find my friend a more comfortable lodging, at a price he could

afford to pay; for October was half over, and he could not continue to sleep much longer in the open air. I asked him if he had any plans for the cold winter days. He looked grave.

"No. But I suppose I shall manage somehow—like the sparrows."

I thought for a while. "John," I said at last, "do you remember the woman who spoke to you so sharply in the alley the day we met?"

"Yes. I shall never forget anything that happened that day," he answered softly. "Her name was Sally Watkins, wasn't it?"

"Yes. So you remember even that. She was my nurse once. She is not such a bad woman, though trouble has sharpened her temper. Her biggest boy, Bill, who is gone for a soldier, used to drive your cart, you know."

"Yes?" said John interrogatively, for I was slow in putting forth my plans—that is, as much of them as it was needful he should know.

"Sally is poor—not very poor though. Your twopence a night would help her; and I dare say, if you'll let me speak to her, you might have Bill's attic all to yourself. She has but one other lad at home; it's worth trying for."

"It is indeed. You are very kind, Phineas." He said no more words than these—but their tone spoke volumes.

Anxious not to lose a day in the matter, I persuaded John to go with me to Sally Watkins. My father was not to be seen; but I ventured to leave word for him that I was gone home. It was astonishing how bold I was growing, now that there was another beside myself to think and act for.

We reached Widow Watkins's door. It was a poor place—poorer than I had imagined. Sally sat in her kitchen with Jem, her second lad, sad and subdued. She could do nothing but weep over the departed Bill, and curse "Bonyparty." But John's pleasant face and ways soon began to cheer her, and when I put forward my proposition she readily agreed to it. She promised to make John extra comfortable, and keep his presence secret too. John was given leave to go upstairs

and examine his attic, and as I was anxious to see it too, he carried me up with him, and we both sat down on the bed that had been poor Bill's.

It was nothing to boast of, being a mere sacking stuffed with hay—a blanket below, and another at top; I had to beg from Jael the only pair of sheets John owned for a long time. The room was very small, but John gazed about it with an air of proud possession.

"I declare I shall be as happy as a king. Only look out of the window."

Ay, the window was the great advantage; out of it one could crawl on to the roof, and from the roof was the finest view in all Norton Bury. On one side—the town, the Abbey, and beyond it a wide stretch of meadow and woodland as far as you could see; on the other—the broad Ham, the glittering curve of the Severn, and the distant country, sloping up to "the blue hills far away".

"Well, John," said I, when I had watched his beaming face, "do you like your castle? Will it suit you?"

"I rather think it will!" he cried in great delight. And my heart likewise was very glad.

Dear little attic room! close against the sky—so close that many a time the rain came pattering in—how happy we have been there! How often we have both looked back upon it in after days.

Winter came early and sudden that year. To me it was a long, dreary season, worse even than my winters inevitably were. I never stirred from my room, and never saw anyone but my father, Dr. Jessop, and Jael. At last I took courage to say to the former that I wished he would send John Halifax up one day.

"What does thee want the lad for?"

"Only to see him."

"Pshaw! A lad out o' the tanyard is no fit company for thee. Let him alone; he'll do well enough if thee doesn't try to lift him out of his place."

Afraid of doing my friend harm, I said no more; but waited patiently for the coming of spring.

One February day, when the frost had broken at last, I thought I would venture out of doors. So I crawled down into the parlour, and out of the parlour into the garden; Jael scolding, my father roughly encouraging, as he departed to his work. My poor father! he always had the belief that people need not be ill unless they chose, and that I could do a great deal if I would.

I felt very strong to-day. Jael had followed me out, and was now cutting the cabbages. At length I walked up to her, near enough to be able to talk.

"Have you seen Sally Watkins lately?" I asked. "Is she fretting over her trouble?"

"She bean't rich enough to afford fretting. There's Jem and three little 'uns yet to feed, to say naught of another big lad as lives there, and eats a deal more than he pays, I'm sure."

I took the insinuation quietly, for I knew that my father had lately raised John's wages, and he his rent to Sally. This, together with a few other facts that lay between Sally and me, made me quite easy as to his being no burden, but rather a help to the widow—so I let Jael have her say; it did harm to nobody.

"What bold little things snowdrops are. Stop, Jael, you are setting your foot on them."

But I was too late; she had crushed them under her heel. She was even near pulling me down, as she slipped in great hurry and consternation.

"Look at that young gentleman coming down the garden," she exclaimed; "and here be I in my daily gown, and my apron full o' cabbages."

And she dropped the vegetables all over the path as the "gentleman" came towards us. I smiled, for, in spite of his transformation, I at least had no difficulty in recognizing John Halifax.

He had on new clothes, neat, decent, and plain, such as any 'prentice lad might wear. They fitted well his figure, which

had increased both in height, compactness, and grace. Round his neck was a coarse but white shirt frill; and over it fell, carefully arranged, the bright curls of his bonny hair. Easily might Jael or anyone else have "mistaken" him, as she cuttingly said, for a young gentleman.

"What may be thy business here?" she asked roughly.

"Abel Fletcher sent me on a message."

"Out with it then—don't be stopping with Phineas. Thee bean't fit company for him, and his father don't choose it."

"Jael!" I cried indignantly. John never spoke, but his cheek burnt furiously. I took his hand, and told him how glad I was to see him—but, for a minute, I doubt if he heard me.

"Abel Fletcher sent me," he repeated in a well-controlled voice, "that I might go out with Phineas; if *he* objects to my company, it's easy to say so."

My reply may easily be guessed. Jael retired discomfited, crying as she did so, "Be off with thee then, but be back sharp. And, I say, don't thee be leaving the cart o' skins another time under the parlour window."

"I don't drive the cart now," was all he replied.

"Not drive the cart?" I asked eagerly when Jael had disappeared, for I was afraid that some ill chance had happened.

"Only that this winter I've managed to teach myself to read and add up—out of the books you lent me, you know—and your father found it out, and he says I shall go round collecting money instead of skins, and it's much better wages, and—I like it better—that's all."

But, little as he said, his whole face beamed with pride and pleasure. It was in truth a great step forward.

"He must trust you very much, John," said I, knowing how exceedingly particular my father was in his collectors.

"That's it—that's what pleases me so much. He is very good to me, Phineas, and he gave me a special holiday that I might go with you. Isn't that grand?"

"Grand, indeed. What fun we'll have! I almost think I could take a walk myself." For the lad's company gave me new life and strength and hope.

"Where shall we go?" he asked, when we were fairly off, and he was guiding my carriage down Norton Bury streets.

"I think to the Mythe," I replied. The Mythe was a fresh, breezy little hill on the outskirts of the town, where Squire Brithwood had built himself a fine house ten years ago.

"Ay, that will do; and as we go, you will see the floods out—a wonderful sight, isn't it? The river is rising fast, I hear; at the tanyard they are busy making a dam against it.—How high are the floods here generally, Phineas?"

"I'm sure I can't remember. But don't look so serious. Let's enjoy ourselves.—So you can read quite easily now, John."

"Pretty well considering." Then turning suddenly to me, "You read a great deal, don't you? I overheard your father say that you were very clever. How much do you know?"

"Oh, nonsense!" But he pressed me, and I told him. The list was short enough; but I almost wished it were shorter when I saw John's face.

"And me—I can only just read, and I shall be fifteen directly."

"Don't mind," I said, laying my feeble, useless hand upon the strong one that guided me along so steadily; "how could you have had time, working as hard as you do."

"But I ought to learn; I must learn."

"You shall. It's little I can teach; but if you like, I'll teach you all I know."

"Oh, Phineas!" His face glowed with gratitude and thankfulness, and I was satisfied.

We reached the Mythe, and John pushed me to the top of the steep mound. Close below, at the foot of a precipitous slope, lay the Severn, a calm, gracious, generous river, bearing strength in its tide and plenty in its bosom, fertilizing the land through which it flows.

"Do you like the Severn still, John?"

"I love it." He had sat down; but now suddenly he rose to his feet. "What is that?" he cried, pointing to a new sight which even I had not often seen on our river. It was a mass

of water, three or four feet high, which came surging along the mid-stream, upright as a wall.

"It's the eger; it is caused by the swift seaward current meeting the spring tide. Look what a crest of foam it has, like a wild boar's mane. We often call it the river-boar."

"But it's only a big wave."

"Big enough to swamp any boat though. . . ."

And while I spoke I saw, to my horror, that there actually was a boat, with two men in it, trying to get out of the way of the eger.

"They never can! They'll assuredly be drowned! Oh, John!"

But he had already slipped from my side, and swung himself, by furze bushes and grass, down the steep slope to the water's edge.

It was a breathless moment. The eger travelled slowly in its passage, changing the smooth, sparkling river into a whirl of conflicting currents, in which no boat could live—least of all that light pleasure-boat, with its toppling sail. In it was a youth I knew by sight, Mr. Brithwood of the Mythe House, and another gentleman.

They both pulled hard—they got out of the mid-stream, but not close enough to land; and already there was but two oars' length between them and the "boar".

"Swim for it!" I heard one cry to the other; but swimming would not have saved them.

"Hold there!" shouted John at the top of his voice; "throw the rope out, and I will pull you in."

It was a hard tug; I shuddered to see him wade knee-deep in the stream—but he succeeded. Both gentlemen leaped safe on shore. The younger tried desperately to save his boat, but it was too late. Already the "water-boar" had clutched it—the rope broke like a gossamer thread—the trim, white sail was dragged down—rose up once, broken and torn—then disappeared.

"So it's all over with her, poor thing!"

"Who cares? We might have lost our lives," sharply said

the other, an older and sickly-looking gentleman, dressed in mourning. They both scrambled up the Mythe without noticing John Halifax. Then the elder turned to where he stood, emptying his soaked boots.

"So it was you who pulled us ashore, my young friend. We owe you much."

"Not more than a crown will pay, Cousin March," said young Brithwood gruffly. "I know him. He works in Fletcher the tanner's yard."

"Nonsense," cried Mr. March, who had stood looking at the boy with a kindly, even half-sad air. "Impossible! Young man, tell me to whom I am so much obliged."

"My name is John Halifax."

"Yes, but *what* are you?"

"What he said. Mr. Brithwood knows me well enough. I work in the tanyard."

"Oh!" Mr. March turned away with a resumption of dignity, though evidently much surprised and disappointed. Young Brithwood laughed.

"I told you so, cousin. Hey, lad! you've been out to grass, and changed your coat for the better, but you're certainly the same lad that my currie nearly ran over one day; you were driving a cart of skins—pah! I remember."

"So do I," said John fiercely. But he quickly controlled himself, and the laughter ceased.

"Well, you've done me a good turn for an ill one, so here's a guinea for you." He threw it towards him; it fell on the ground and lay there.

"Nay, nay, Richard," expostulated the sickly gentleman. "My good fellow," he said turning again to John, "I won't forget your bravery. If I could do anything for you—and meanwhile if a trifle like this"—and he slipped something into John's hand.

John returned it with a bow, merely saying he would rather not take money.

The gentleman looked very much astonished; but seeing that John was in earnest; he put the guineas irresolutely back

into his pocket, looking awhile at the boy, his tall figure, and flushed, proud face.

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen nearly."

"Ah!" it was almost a sigh. He turned away, and turned back again. "My name is March—Henry March; if you should ever——"

"Thank you, sir. Good day."

"Good day." I fancied he was half inclined to shake hands—but John did not—or would not, see it. Mr. March walked on, and soon both men were out of view.

"I'm glad they've gone," said John as he flung himself down beside me; "now we can be comfortable."

Crossing the Avon bridge later, on our way home, we stood once more to look at the waters that were "out". They had risen considerably, and were now pouring in several new channels, one of which was alongside the highroad.

"I don't quite like this," said John meditatively, as his quick eyes swept down the course of the river. "Did you ever see the waters thus high before?"

"Yes, I believe I have; nobody minds it at Norton Bury; it is only the sudden thaw after the snows, my father says, and he ought to know, for he has had plenty of experience, the tanyard being so close to the river."

"I was thinking of that; but come, it's getting cold."

He took me home, and we parted cordially—nay, affectionately—at my own door.

"Will you come again, John?"

"When your father sends me."

I felt that *he* felt that our intercourse was always to be limited thus: nothing clandestine was possible to John Halifax.

My father came in late that evening, looking tired and uneasy; and, instead of going to bed, though it was after nine o'clock, he sat down to his pipe in the chimney-corner.

"Is the river rising still, Father? Will it do any harm to the tanyard?"

"What dost thee know about the tanyard?"

"Only John Halifax was saying——"

"John Halifax had better hold his tongue."

I held mine. My father puffed away in silence till I came to bid him good night. He then asked me about my outing with John, and I told him of our exciting experience when on the Mythe, adding, "Wasn't it a brave thing to do, Father?"

"Um!" and a few meditative puffs. "Phineas, the lad thee hast such a hankering after is a good lad—a very decent lad—if thee doesn't make too much of him. Remember he is but my servant; and thee'rt my son—my only son."

In the middle of the night there was a knocking at the hall door. I slept in a little room on the ground floor, and ere I could well collect my thoughts, I saw my father pass, fully dressed with a light in his hand. The knocking grew louder.

"Who's there?" called out my father; and at the answer he opened the front door, first shutting mine. A minute later I heard someone in my room. "Phineas, are you here?—don't be frightened."

I was not as soon as his voice reached me, John's voice. "Is it something about the tanyard?"

"Yes; the waters are rising, and I've come to fetch your father; he may save a good deal yet. I am ready, sir," in answer to a loud call—"Now, Phineas, lie you down again—the night's bitter cold. Don't stir—you'll promise?—I'll see after your father."

They went out of the house together; and did not return the whole night.

That night, February 5th, 1795, was one long remembered at Norton Bury. Bridges were destroyed—boats carried away—houses inundated, or sapped at their foundations. The loss of life was small, but that of property was very great. Six hours did the work of ruin, and then the flood began to turn.

It was a long wait till my father and John came home. At daybreak I saw them standing on the doorstep. A blessed sight!

"O Father! my dear Father!"

"Phineas! Thee'rt up early, my son; and it's a cold morning for thee. Go back to the fire." His voice was gentle and his countenance pale—two strange things for Abel Fletcher.

"Father, tell me what has befallen thee?"

"Nothing, my son, save that the Giver of all worldly goods has seen fit to take back a portion of mine. And thousands of others have suffered the same way."

"Father, never mind; it might have been worse."

"Of a surety. I should have lost all I had—save for—where is the lad? What art thee standing outside for? Come in, John, and shut the door."

John obeyed, though without advancing. He was cold and wet. I motioned to him to sit by the fire.

"Ay, do, lad," said my father kindly. John came. "Ah, Jael, give us some breakfast, the lad and me—we have had a hard night's work together."

Jael brought the mug of ale and the bread and cheese: but either did not or would not notice that the meal had been ordered for more than one.

"Another plate, Jael," said my father sharply.

"The lad can go into the kitchen, Abel Fletcher; his breakfast is waiting there."

My father winced—even he was sometimes afraid of Jael. But conscience or his will conquered.

"Woman, do as I desired. Bring another plate and another mug of ale."

And so, to Jael's wrath, and to my great joy, John sat down at the same table as his master. The fact made an ineffaceable impression on our household.

After breakfast, as we sat by the fire, my father, contrary to his wont, explained to me all his losses; and how, but for the timely warning he had received, the flood might nearly have ruined him.

"So it was well John came," I said, half afraid to say more.

"Ay, the lad has been useful too; it's an old head on young shoulders."

John looked very proud of this praise, though it was grimly given. But directly after it a suspicious thought seemed to come into Abel Fletcher's mind.

"Lad," suddenly turning on John; "what wast thee doing then, out o' thy honest bed, at eleven o'clock at night? Answer!"

John coloured violently. "I was doing no harm. I was in the tanyard."

"Thy business there?"

"None. I was with the men. I wanted to watch with them."

"Is that all, lad?"

"Yes."

Abel Fletcher lit his pipe and fell into a brown study. We two lads talked softly to each other—afraid to interrupt.

"John Halifax," said my father at last. "It's time thee went away to thy work."

"I'm going this minute." He rose cap in hand. "Good-bye, Phineas. Good-day, sir. Is there anything you want done?" He stood before his master with an honest manliness, pleasant to see. Any master might have been proud of such a servant—any father of such a son. My poor father—no, he did not once look from John Halifax to me. He would not for the world have owned that half-smothered sigh, or murmured because heaven had kept back from him the one desire of his heart.

"John Halifax, thee hast been of great service to me this night. What reward shall I give thee?" And instinctively his hand dived into his pocket. John turned away.

"Thank you—I'd rather not. It's quite enough that I have been useful to my master, and that he acknowledges it."

My father thought for a minute, and then offered his hand. "Thee'rt in the right, lad. I am very much obliged to thee, and I will not forget it."

And John, blushing brightly once more—but this time with pleasure—went away.

“Is there nothing *thee* canst think of, Phineas, that would pleasure the lad?”

I *had* thought of something, and now, though still with doubt and hesitation, I made the suggestion that he should spend every Sunday at our house. My father looked at me with astonishment, and declared that the lad would sooner lounge about at street corners with his acquaintances. But I persisted, and seeing my own eagerness, he finally consented.

John Halifax was henceforth to be received in his master's house, for one day in the week at least, as our equal and my friend.

CHAPTER IV

THE years slipped by, and one June morning I woke to the consciousness that I was twenty, and John within a week of his eighteenth birthday. The interest which had come to me from our friendship had improved my health; but I was still a weak, puny creature. John was a fine, handsome young fellow, nearly six feet tall.

The day was a Sunday, and in the afternoon we sat talking together in the clematis arbour.

"It seems very strange, John," I said, as I sat looking down into the river, "that I am actually twenty."

He smiled. "Well, what of it, Phineas? What are you thinking of?"

"Of myself. What a fine specimen of manhood I am."

I spoke bitterly, but John knew how to meet the mood. Very patient he was with it, and with every ill mood of mine.

"Self-investigation is good on birthdays, Phineas. So here goes for a catalogue of your qualities, internal and external."

"John don't be foolish."

"I will, if I like," he continued laughing. "Listen. Height—five feet, four inches; a stature equal to that of many great men—including Alexander of Macedon, and the First Consul."

"Oh, oh!" said I reproachfully; for this was our chief bone of contention—I hating, he rather admiring the great ogre of the day, Napoleon Bonaparte.

"Of a slight, delicate person, but not lame as once was."

"No, thank God!"

"Thin—rather——"

"Very—a mere skeleton."

"Face elongated and pale——"

"Sallow, John, decidedly sallow."

"Be it so, sallow. Big eyes, much given to observation. And long black hair, which any damsel would think exceedingly bewitching—only we count not a single one among our acquaintance."

I smiled, feeling myself colour a little too. Twenty years old though I was, Jael and Sally were the only two specimens of the other sex which had risen on my horizon. And I knew well enough that my own character was too feeble, too womanish, to be likely to win any woman's love. And in any event, stricken as I was with hereditary disease, I could never seek to perpetuate it by marriage. But I *had* friendship, and I brushed these gloomy thoughts aside, remarking that, while I hardly looked my age, John looked older than his eighteen years. He smiled with pleasure.

"Yes, so others have told me; and I am glad I do. It tells well in the tanyard. People would be slow to trust a clerk who looked a mere boy. Still, your father trusts me."

"He does indeed. Once he did not like it that you studied so much in the evenings. But now he says it is all to the good, as education has made you a better man of business."

"I am glad he does not complain now, Phineas."

"On the contrary, I think he intends to give you a rise this mid-summer. But oh! how I wish you were something better than a clerk at the tanyard. I have a plan, John."

But that plan was fated to remain unrevealed; for at that moment Jael came to us in the garden, looking very serious—to summon me to an interview with my father and Dr. Jessop. I knew well what the object of the conference was. My father had not yet abandoned his hope that I might some day succeed him in his business, and our doctor had been called to-day, to express his opinion as to whether this would ever be possible. But I knew that my poor father's plans were vain, and I went into his presence with a heavy heart.

There is no need to detail that interview. Enough that after it he set aside his last lingering hope, and I set aside every dream of growing up to be a help and comfort to him. It cost us something on both our parts, but after that day's

discussion we tacitly covered up the pain, and referred to it no more.

I came back into the garden, and told John Halifax all. He listened with his hand on my shoulder, and then added a few words of comfort; then he and I also drew the curtain over an inevitable grief, and laid it in the peaceful chamber of silence.

That evening my father, naturally enough, was unusually grave and silent; and when the meal was over he sat mutely smoking his pipe. John and I, at the window, maintained that respectful and decorous silence which in my young days was rigidly exacted by elders and superiors. But I noticed my father's eyes frequently resting, with keen observance, upon my friend. Could it be that the hint which I had once faintly given him—a hint which he had scouted indignantly at the time—was now germinating in his brain, and might bear fruit in future days? I hoped earnestly that it might be so.

At length John rose to go. "Good night, sir." He said it twice over, before his master heard him.

"Eh? Oh, good night, good night, lad! Stay, Halifax, what hast thee got to do to-morrow?"

"Not much, unless the Russian hides should come in; I cleared off the week's accounts last night as usual."

"Ay, to-morrow I shall look over all thy books and see how thee stand'st and what further work thee art fit for. Take therefore a day's holiday, if thee likes."

We thanked him warmly; and it was arranged that, if the weather continued fine, we should spend a lazy day together in some fields about a mile off, called the Vineyards.

The morning came and we made our way thither. I accomplished the walk with little difficulty, for I felt unusually well. All morning we lounged in the sunshine, talking when we felt like it, and remaining silent when we wished.

In the afternoon, when we had finished our bread and cheese, John said suddenly—"Phineas, don't you think this field is rather dull? Shall we go somewhere else? Not if it tires you though."

I protested that I was quite rested enough to be ready to

move, that my health had never been so good as it was this summer. But, just as we were quitting the field, we met two rather odd-looking persons entering it; young-old persons they seemed, who might own to any age or occupation. Their dress, especially that of the younger, amused us by its queer mixture of fashionableness and homeliness, such as grey ribbed stockings and shining paste shoe-buckles, rusty velvet small-clothes, and a coatee of blue cloth. But the wearers carried off this anomalous costume with an easy, condescending air, full of pleasantness, humour, and grace.

"Sir," said the younger man, approaching John Halifax with a courtly bow, "will you favour me by informing me how far it is to Coltham?"

"Ten miles, and the stage will pass here in three hours."

"Thank you; at present I have little to do with the stage—at least *that* stage. Young gentlemen, excuse our continuing our dessert, in fact, I may say our dinner. Are you connoisseurs in turnips?"

He offered us—with a polite gesture—one of the "swedes" he was munching. I declined; but John with a greater sense of delicacy, accepted it.

"One might dine worse," he said; "I have done so many times."

"It was a whim of mine, sir. But I am not the first remarkable person who has eaten turnips in your Norton Bury fields—ay, and turned preacher afterwards.—The celebrated John Philip——"

Here the elder and less agreeable of the two wayfarers interposed with a nudge, indicating silence.

"My companion is right, sir," he continued. "I will not betray my illustrious friend by mentioning his surname; he is a great man now. May I give you instead my own humble name?"

He gave it; but I, Phineas Fletcher, shall copy his reticence, and not divulge it here. It was a name wholly out of my sphere; but I know it has since become famous. I will only call him "Mr. Charles".

"Well, young gentlemen," he continued, "having now 'munched and munched and munched' like the sailor's wife who had chestnuts in her lap—are you acquainted with my friend, Mr. William Shakespeare?—I must now try to fulfil the other duties of existence. You said the Coltham mail passed here in three hours? Very well, I have the honour of wishing you a very good day, Mr.—"

We told him our names. He bowed again with as much ceremony as before; then he and his companion passed on.

"That man has evidently seen a good deal of the world," said John smiling. "I wonder what the world is like."

"Did you not see something of it as a child?"

"Only the worst and lowest side; not the one I want to see now. What business do you think that Mr. Charles is in? A clever man anyhow; I should like to see him again."

Thus speculating upon our new acquaintances we strolled on till we came to a spot called by the country people "The Bloody Meadow" from being a scene of slaughter in the Wars of the Roses. Haymaking was here in progress, and the lanes were quite populous with wagons and haymakers, besides a number of townsfolk who had turned out to make holiday in the sunshine.

"I think we will go to a quieter place, John. There seems quite a crowd down in that meadow—Who is the man standing in the hay-cart on the other side of the stream?"

"Don't you remember the bright blue coat? 'Tis Mr. Charles. How he's talking and gesticulating! What can he be at?"

Without more ado, John leaped the low hedge, and ran down the slope of the Bloody Meadow. I followed less quickly.

There, of a surety, stood our new friend, on one of the simple-fashioned hay-carts we used about Norton Bury. He was bareheaded and his hair hung in graceful curls, well powdered. Despite his strange costume Mr. Charles was a very handsome man. No wonder the poor haymakers had collected from all parts to hear his harangue.

What was he haranguing about? Could it be that like his friend "John Philip", whoever that person might be, his vocation was that of a field preacher? It seemed like it, especially judging from the sanctified demeanour of his companion, who now sat in front of the cart, and folded his hands and groaned, after the most approved fashion of a "Methodist" revival.

We listened, expecting to be disgusted and shocked: but no! I must say this for Mr. Charles, that in no way did he trespass the bounds of reverence and decorum. His harangue, though given as a sermon, was strictly and simply a moral essay. In fact, as we afterwards learned, he had given for his text one which the simple rustics received in all respect, as coming from a higher and holier volume than Shakespeare:

"Mercy is twice blessed:

"It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

"'Tis mightiest in the mightiest!"

And on that text did he dilate, with such brilliant eloquence and earnestness, and in a voice so beautiful, that I felt myself deeply moved. John, I could see, was as stirred as I was.

At last, when the orator paused, quite exhausted, and asked for a slight contribution "to help a deed of charity", there was a general rush towards him.

"No—no, my good people," said Mr. Charles, recovering his natural manner—though a little clouded I thought, by a faint shade of remorse; "no, I will not take from anyone more than a penny; and only then if they are quite sure they are able to spare it.—Thank you, my worthy man. Thanks, my bonnie young lass—I hope your sweetheart will soon be back from the wars. Thank you, all, my 'very worthy and approved good masters', and a fair harvest to you all."

He bowed them away, in a dignified and graceful manner, and the honest folk trooped off. Mr. Charles then descended from his cart. His companion burst into roars of laughter; but Mr. Charles looked grave.

"Poor, honest souls!" said he, wiping his brows—and I

believe his eyes also.—“Hang me if I’ll try this trick again, Yates.”

“It was a trick then, sir,” said John advancing. “I am sorry for it.”

“So am I, young man,” returned the other. “But starvation is, excuse me, unpleasant, and necessity knows no law. It is of vital consequence that I should reach Coltham to-night; and after walking ten miles one cannot easily walk ten more, and then appear as Macbeth to an admiring audience—I am, please your worship—

‘A poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is seen no more.’”

There was such inexpressible pathos in his tone—his fine face looked so thin and worn—that our feelings were quickly softened. Besides we had lately been studying Shakespeare, who for the first time of reading usually sends young people tragedy mad.

“You acted well to-day,” said John; “they all took you for a Methodist preacher.”

“Yet I never meddled with theology—only common morality.”

“No. But what put the scheme into your head?”

“The fact that, under a like necessity, the same amusing play was played out here years ago, as I told you, by John Philip—no, I will not conceal his name any longer—the greatest actor and truest gentleman our stage has ever seen—John Philip Kemble.”

He raised his hat in reverence. Even we had heard of this wonderful man.

I saw that the fascination of Mr. Charles’s society was strongly upon my friend. It was no wonder. More brilliant, more versatile talent I never saw. He turned “from grave to gay, from lively to severe”—appearing in all phases the gentleman, the scholar, the man of the world.

The afternoon began to wane as we sat talking by the

brookside. Mr. Charles had washed his face and his travel-sore, blistered feet, and we had induced him and his companion to share the remnants of our bread and cheese.

"Now," he said, starting up. "I am ready to do battle even against the Thane of Fife. What is the hour, Mr. Halifax?"

"Mr. Halifax" had no watch, but he made a near guess by calculating the position of his unfailing timepiece, the sun. It was near four o'clock.

"Then I must go. Will you not retract, young gentlemen? Surely you would not lose such a rare treat as 'Macbeth', with—I will not say my humble self—but that divine Siddons. Such a woman! Shakespeare himself might lean out of Elysium to watch her."

John made a silent, dolorous negative, as he had done once or twice before, when the actor had endeavoured to persuade us to accompany him to Coltham—though we might be back by midnight easily.

"What do you think, Phineas?" said John, when we stood in the high road. "I have the money—and—and we have so little pleasure.—We would send word to your father. Do you think it would be wrong?"

I could not say, and, accustomed as I was to leave decisions in my friend's hand, I remained passive. A few minutes later the stage came into view; I was still ignorant of what he intended to do.

It came—the coachman was hailed. Mr. Charles shook hands with us and mounted. John put his hands on my shoulders and looked hard into my face.

"Phineas, are you tired?"

"Not at all."

"Do you feel strong enough to go to Coltham? Would it do you any harm? Would you *like* to go?"

I nodded my head. It was sufficient to me that he evidently wanted to go.

"It's only for once—your father would not grudge us the pleasure, and he is too busy to be out of the tanyard before midnight. We'll be home soon after that. Come, we'll go."

"Bravo," cried Mr. Charles, and leaned over to help me up the coach's side. John followed and the crisis was past.

But I noticed that for several miles he hardly spoke one word.

Arrived at Coltham, Mr. Charles left us, appointing a meeting at Coffee-house Yard, where the theatre was then. We entered the "Fleece", the inn to which the coach had brought us.

"The theatre is a poor barnlike place, I believe," said John, stopping in his walk up and down the room to place my cushions more easy. "They should build a new one, now Coltham is growing into such a fashionable town." (John was himself no stranger to it.) "I wish I could take you to see the 'Well Walk', with all the fine people promenading. But you must rest, Phineas."

I consented, being indeed rather weary.

"You will like to see Mrs. Siddons, whom we have so often talked about? She is not young now, Mr. Charles says, but magnificent still. She first came out in this same theatre twenty years ago. Yates saw her. I wonder, Phineas, if your father ever did?"

"Oh, no. My father would not enter a playhouse for the world. No Quaker will ever do so."

"What!"

"Nay, John, you need not look so troubled. He did not bring me up in the Society and its restrictions are not binding on me."

"True, true." And he resumed his walk, but not his cheerfulness. "I hold that the play is a lawful pleasure which I have a right to enjoy. If it were myself alone — Phineas, would you like to go home? I'll take you?"

I protested earnestly against any such thing; told him I was sure I was doing no wrong—which indeed was my own belief. His face cleared, and when at length we started for Coffee-house Yard our spirits were high enough.

The playhouse was indeed a poor place—built in a lane

leading out of the principal street. The lane was blocked with playgoers of all ranks in all sorts of equipages, from the coach and six to the sedan chair, mingled with a jostling, fighting crowd on foot. John reassured me, telling me that he would see that no harm came to me; yet as the throng grew denser and more formidable, I began to wish that I was safe home again.

But now there came a slight swaying in the crowd, as a sedan chair was borne aloft—or attempted to be—for the effort failed. There was a scuffle: one of its bearers was knocked down and hurt. Someone called "Shame!" others seemed to think that this incident only added to the frolic. At last, in the midst of the confusion, a lady put her head out of the sedan and gazed round her.

It was a remarkable countenance; once seen you could never forget it. Pale, rather large and hard in outline, an aquiline nose—full, passionate, yet sensitive lips—and very dark eyes. She spoke, and the voice belonged naturally to such a face. "Good people, let me pass—I am Sarah Siddons."

The crowd divided instantaneously, setting up a cheer as they did so. Mrs. Siddons smiled—such a smile!—and then the sedan curtain closed.

"Now's the time—only hold fast to me!" whispered John, as he sprang forward, dragging me after him. In another second he had caught up the pole dropped by the man who was hurt; and before I well knew what we were about we stood safe in the entrance to the theatre.

Mrs. Siddons stepped out—a tall, impressive figure—and proceeded to pay her bearers. Then she turned to John Halifax.

"I regret young man, that you should have had so much trouble. Here is some requital."

He took the money, selected from it one silver coin, and returned the rest.

"I will keep this madam, if you please, as a memento that I once had the honour of being useful to Mrs. Siddons."

She looked at him keenly, out of her wonderful dark eyes,

then curtsied with grave dignity. "I thank you, sir," she said, and passed on.

A few minutes' later some underling of the theatre found us out and brought us, "by Mrs. Siddons' desire" to the best place the house could afford.

It was a notable sight. Shabby and small as the place was, it was filled with all the *beau monde* of Coltham. But it was the play for which we were waiting, and at last it began.

I am not going to follow it; all the world has heard of the Lady Macbeth of Mrs. Siddons. It was the first and last play I ever witnessed, and it stands out clear in my memory after more than half a century. Still I can see her, that wondrous woman, who did not act, but *was*, Lady Macbeth: still I hear the awestruck, questioning, weirdlike tone that sent an involuntary shudder through the house, as if supernatural things were abroad—"They made themselves—air." And still there quivers through the silence that piteous cry of a strong heart broken—"All the perfumes of Arabia will never sweeten this little hand." The divine Sarah is gone, but I shall go down to the grave worshipping her still.

The play ended. There was some buffooning still to come, but we would not stay for that. We staggered out, half-blind and dazzled, both in eyes and brain, into the darkened streets. And as we did so we heard a church clock striking over the silent town. We counted the strokes, for while in the play-house, time for us had ceased to exist. Eleven o'clock! Horrified, we stared at each other by the light of a lamp. The coach for Norton Bury had gone.

Now that the excitement was over, I turned sick and faint. "What must we do, John?"

"Do! Oh! 'tis quite easy. You cannot walk: we'll hire a gig. I have money enough—all my month's wages—see!" He felt in his pockets one after the other; his countenance grew blank. "Phineas! my money has gone. Someone in that crowd outside the theatre must have stolen it."

"Would not somebody trust us?" I suggested.

But his efforts to hire a gig, with an undertaking to pay for

it later on, were unsuccessful. There was nothing to do but to walk the ten long miles that divided us from Norton Bury.

I will not describe that terrible walk in detail. It was one of the worst ordeals I have ever had to undergo. For a mile or two I trudged on, John trying to keep up my spirits, with cheerful conversation, and supporting me with his strong right arm. But then my footsteps began to flag, and I was bound to sit down and rest. Hardly had I done so than I lost consciousness.

When I came to I was lying by a tiny brook at the roadside, my head resting on John's knees. He was bathing my forehead: I could not see him, but I heard his smothered moan.

"John, don't mind. I shall be well directly."

"Oh, Phineas, Phineas; I thought I had killed you."

I tried to rise. There was a faint streak in the east. "Why, it is daybreak. How far are we from Norton Bury?"

"Not very far. Don't stir a step, I shall carry you."

"Impossible."

"Nonsense; I have done it for half a mile already. Come, mount!"

I obeyed, and again we started off. What strength supported him I cannot tell, but he certainly carried me—with many rests and pauses between—the whole way to Norton Bury. When at last we reached my father's door, haggard and miserable, it was in the pale sunshine of a summer morning.

All the windows were closed, as if the whole peaceful establishment were taking its sleep, prior to the early stirring of Norton Bury households. Even John's loud knocking was some time before it was answered. I was too exhausted to feel much, but I knew that those awful five minutes of waiting seemed interminable.

"Courage!" said John; "I'll bear all the blame. We have committed no absolute sin, and we have paid dearly for our folly."

At the five minutes end my father opened the door. He was dressed as usual, looked as usual. Whether he had sat up watching, or had suffered any anxiety, I never found out.

He said nothing; merely admitted us. But we were certain, from his face, that he knew all. No doubt some neighbour, driving home from Coltham, had taken pains to tell Abel Fletcher that he had seen his son—at the very last place a Quaker's son ought to be seen—the playhouse. We knew that it was by no means to learn the truth, but to confront us with it, that he asked the stern question:

"Phineas, where hast thee been?"

John answered for me. "To the theatre at Coltham. It was my fault. We went because I wished to go."

"And wherefore didst thee wish to go?"

"Wherefore?" The answer seemed hard to find. "Oh, Mr. Fletcher, were you never young like me? I long sometimes for a little amusement—a little change."

My father looked at him in stern silence. Then, "Thee shall have it," he said slowly and quietly. Another pause. "How long hast thee planned this, John Halifax?"

"Not a day—not an hour. It was a sudden freak of mine." (My father shook his head with contemptuous incredulity). "Sir!—Abel Fletcher—did I ever tell you a lie? If you will not believe me, believe your own son. Ask Phineas—No, no, ask him nothing." And he came in great distress to the sofa where I had fallen. "Oh, Phineas, how cruel I have been to you."

I tried to smile, being past speaking—but my father pushed him aside.

"Young man, I can take care of my son. Thee shalt not lead him into harm's way any more. Go—I have been mistaken in thee."

The words were spoken quietly, coldly and without passion; but passion and reproach would have been far more endurable. John lifted to him a mute face from which all pride had ebbed away.

"I repeat, I have been mistaken in thee! Thee seemed a lad to my mind. I trusted thee. This day, by my son's wish, I meant to have bound thee prentice, and in due time to have taken thee into the business. Now——"

There was silence. At last John muttered in a low, broken-hearted voice, "I deserve it all. I can go away. I might perhaps earn my living elsewhere. Shall I?"

Abel Fletcher hesitated, looked at the poor lad before him, then said, "No—I do not wish that. At least not at present."

I cried out in the joy and relief of my heart. John came over to me and we clasped hands.

"John, you will not go?"

"No, I will stay to redeem my character with your father. Be content, Phineas—I won't part with you."

"Young man, thee must," said my father, turning round.

"But——"

"I have said it, Phineas. I accuse him of no dishonesty, no crime, but of weakly yielding to the temptation of the world. Therefore as my clerk I retain him; as my son's companion—never!"

I knew that "never" was irrevocable; yet I tried vainly to wrestle against it. I might as well have flung myself against a brick wall.

John stood perfectly silent. "Don't, Phineas," he whispered at last. "Your father is right—at least as far as he sees. Let me go—perhaps I may come back to you sometime. If not——"

I moaned out bitter words—I hardly knew what I was saying. My father took no notice, only went to the door and called Jael. Before the woman came I found strength to bid John good-bye.

"Good-bye—don't forget me, don't!"

"I will not," he said, "and if we live, we shall be friends again. Good-bye, Phineas." He was gone.

And then, for two long years, though he remained in the tanyard, I never once saw the face of John Halifax.

CHAPTER V

It was the year 1800, long known in English households as "the dear year". A terrible time it was: War, Famine and Tumult stalking hand in hand, and no one to stay them. Between upper and lower classes a great gulf was fixed. The rich ground the faces of the poor; the poor hated, yet meanly succumbed to the rich. These troubles, which were everywhere abroad, reached us even in our quiet town of Norton Bury. And though, during the two years since my parting with my friend, I had had to bear so much bodily suffering that I was seldom told of any worldly cares, still I was not ignorant that things were going ill both within and without our doors. My father's brow grew continually heavier, and Jael complained of stinted housekeeping.

John Halifax still remained my father's clerk—nay, I sometimes thought he was even advancing in duties and trusts, for I heard of his being sent long journeys up and down England to buy grain—Abel Fletcher having added to his tanner's business the flour-mill hard by.

Summer was passing. People were watching the thin harvest fields with anxious looks—as Jael often told me when she came home from her afternoon walks. "It was piteous to see the poor folk," she said; "only July, and the quartern loaf nearly three shillings, and meal four shillings a peck."

And then she would glance towards the flour mill, where my father kept his store of grain, locked up, waiting for what, he shrewdly judged, would be an even worse harvest than last year's. But Jael, though she said nothing, shook her head. And after one market day—when she came in rather flustered, saying there had been a hungry mob outside the mill, until 'that young man Halifax' had gone out and spoken to them—she never once allowed me to take my rare walk under the trees in the Abbey Yard.

One Sunday—it was the first of August—my father came back from the Quaker's meeting very much later than usual; and I soon saw that he was much worried. He sat silent at dinner, wearing the heavy, hard look which had grown of late on his face, not unmingled with wrinkles planted by physical pain. For, with all his temperance, he could not quite keep down his hereditary enemy—gout.

Dr. Jessop came, and I stole away gladly enough. But after he had left, my father sent for me and all his household, to which had now been added (as errand boy and gardener's boy) Sally Watkins's second son, Jem. He first addressed Jael.

"Woman, was it thee who cooked the dinner to-day?" She gave a dignified affirmative, and he went on, "Thee must give us no more such dinners. Our neighbours shall not say that Abel Fletcher has plenty in his house while there is famine abroad in the land. Take heed!"

"I do take heed," answered Jael staunchly. "Thee canst not say I waste a penny of thine. And as for myself, do I not pity the poor? But while they be starving in scores about Norton Bury, there be rich folk here who will not sell their wheat under famine prices. Take heed thyself, Abel Fletcher!"

My father winced, either from a twinge of gout or conscience; and then Jael suddenly ceased the attack, sent the other servants out of the room, and tended her master as carefully as if she had not insulted him. Jael's manner was rough and her tongue sharp, but it concealed an unshakeable loyalty to my father, and an affectionate devotion to myself. My father had lately suffered a long bout of severe pain which had left him considerably exhausted.

As soon as Jael had left us, he said to me, "Phineas, the tanyard has thriven ill of late, and I thought the mill would make up for it. But if it will not, it will not. Wouldst thee mind, son, being left a little poor when I am gone?"

"Father!"

"Well, then, in a few days, I will begin selling my wheat as that lad has advised and begged me to do these weeks

past. He is a sharp lad, and I am getting old. Perhaps he is right."

On the Monday morning my father went to the tanyard as usual, but when dinner-time came, a meal for which he was always so punctual, he had not returned. Three hours went by, and not even a message came from him. I grew anxious, and at last prevailed on Jael to send Jem Watkins to the tanyard to see what had happened.

He came back with ill-news. The lane leading to the tanyard was blocked with a wild mob. Even the stolid, starved patience of our Norton Bury poor had come to an end at last—they had followed the example of many others. There was a bread riot in the town. It was chiefly about our mill and our tanyard that the disturbance lay.

"And where is my father?"

Jem "didn't know", and looked very much as if he didn't care.

"Jael, somebody must go at once and find my father."

"I am going," said Jael, who had already put on her cloak and hood. Of course, despite all her opposition, I went too.

The tanyard was deserted; the mob had already divided, and gone, one half to our mill, the rest to another that was lower down the river. A poor frightened bark-cutter, whom I questioned, said that she did not know where my father was—though someone had said that he had gone for "the military"—but "Mr. Halifax", she knew, was at the mill now.

There was nothing for me to do but to wait in the yard till my father returned. He could surely not be so insane as to go to the mill—and John was there. Terribly was my heart divided, but my duty lay with my father.

Jael sat down in the shed, or marched restlessly between the tanpits. I went to the end of the yard, and looked down the river towards the mill. What a half-hour it was!

At last, exhausted, I sat down on that same bark heap where John had slept as a lad after first entering my father's service.

But a minute later I heard a footstep crossing the yard—not my father's—it was firmer, younger, quicker.

“Phineas!”

“John.”

What a grasp that was—both hands! and how eagerly and proudly I looked into his face—the still boyish face. But the figure was that of a man now.

For a minute we forgot ourselves in our joy, and then he let go my hands, saying hurriedly:

“Where is your father?”

“I wish I knew. Gone for the soldiers, they say.”

“No, not that—he would never do that. I must go and look for him. Good-bye.”

“Oh, no, John.”

“Can’t—can’t,” said he firmly; “not while your father forbids. I must go.” And he was gone.

My heart rebelled, though my conscience defended him. But a few minutes later I saw him and my father enter the tanyard together, earnestly talking. Or rather John was talking and my father was listening—ay, listening to John Halifax. I went to meet them.

“Phineas,” said John anxiously, “come and help me.—No, Abel Fletcher,” he added, rather proudly, in reply to a sharp, suspicious glance, “your son and I only met ten minutes ago, and scarcely exchanged a word. But we cannot waste time over that matter now.—Phineas, help me to persuade your father to save his property. He will not call for the aid of the law, because he is a Friend. Besides, for that very reason it might be useless asking.”

“Verily!” said my father bitterly, “the law will do nothing to protect Quakers.”

“But he might get his own men to defend his property, and not do what he is intent on doing—go to the mill himself.”

“Surely,” was all Abel Fletcher said; and he was already moving away when I caught his arm.

“Father, don’t go.”

“My son,” he said, turning on me one of his iron looks;

"my son, no opposition! Any who try that with *me* will fail. If those fellows had waited two days more I would have sold them my wheat at a hundred shillings a quarter. Now they shall have nothing; it will teach them wisdom another time. Phineas, get thee safe home. Jael, go thee likewise."

But neither went. John held me back as I was following my father.

"He *will* do it, Phineas. Please God, I'll take care no harm touches him—but you go home."

That was not to be thought of. Fortunately the time was too brief for argument. He followed my father and I followed him. Jael disappeared.

There was a private path from the tanyard to the mill, along the riverside; by this we went in silence. When we reached the spot it was deserted; but farther down the river we heard a scuffling, and saw a number of men breaking down our garden wall.

"They think he's gone home," whispered John; "we'll get in here the safer. Quick, Phineas!"

We crossed the little bridge; John took the key out of his pocket and let us into the mill by a small door—the only entrance. It was trebly barred within, as it had good need to be.

The mill was a queer, musty silent place, especially the machinery room, the sole flooring of which was the dark dangerous stream. We stood there a good while—it was the safest place, having no windows. Then we followed my father to the top storey, where he kept his bags of grain. There were very many; enough in those times to make a large fortune by—a cursed fortune wrung out of human lives.

"Oh, how could my father——"

"Hush!" whispered John, "it was for his son's sake, you know."

But while we stood (Abel Fletcher, with a grim but rather meaning smile, counting his bags), we heard a hammering on the doors below. The rioters had come.

Miserable "rioters"! A handful of weak, starved men—

pelting us with stones and words. One pistol shot might have routed them all—but my father's doctrine of non-resistance forbade. Small as their force seemed, there was something at once formidable and pitiful in the low howl that reached us at times.

"Bring out the bags! We must have bread!"

"Abel Fletcher will throw it down to ye, ye knaves," shouted my father grimly, leaning out of the upper window; while a sound, half-curses, half cheers of triumph, answered him from below.

"That is well," exclaimed John eagerly; "I knew you would yield at last."

"Didst thee, lad?"

"Not because they forced you, but because it was right."

"Help me with this bag," was all the reply.

It was a great weight, but not too great for John's strong arm. He hauled it up.

"Now open the window—dash the panes through—it matters not. On to the window, I tell thee."

"But if I do, the bag will fall into the river.—You cannot—you cannot mean that."

"Haul it up to the window, John Halifax."

But John remained immovable. "I must do it myself then," cried my father, and in the desperate effort he made, somehow the bag of grain fell, and fell on his lame foot. Tortured into frenzy—or I still do not believe he would have done such a deed—his failing strength seemed doubled and trebled. In an instant he had got the bag through the window, and the next sound we heard was its heavy splash in the river below.

Flung into the river, the precious wheat, and in the very sight of the famished rioters! A howl of fury and despair arose. Some plunged into the water ere the eddies left by the falling mass had ceased—but it was too late. A sharp substance in the river's bed had cut the bag, and we saw thrown up to the surface, and whirled down the Avon, thousands of dancing grain. A few of the men swam after them clutching

a handful here and there—but by the mill-pool the river ran swift, and the wheat had all soon disappeared, save what remained in the bag when it was drawn on shore. Over even that they fought like demons.

We could not look at them—John and I; the sight was at once too horrible and too heart-rending. Abel Fletcher sat on his remaining bags, exhausted, and, I believe, filled with remorse for what he had done. John looked at him, and looked away. For a minute he listened in silence to the shouting outside, and then he turned to my father.

“Sir, you must come now. Not a second to lose—they will fire the mill next.”

“Let them.”

“Let them?—and Phineas is here!”

My poor father! He rose at once. We got him downstairs, his face all drawn and white with pain; but he uttered no word of opposition or complaint.

The little door of the mill was hid from the opposite bank of the river where the rioters were now collected. In a minute we had crept forth from it, and dashed out of sight, into the narrow path which had been made from the mill to the tanyard.

“We will go home,” said my father, taking John’s proffered arm.

“No, sir, not home: they are there before you. Your life is not safe for an hour—unless, indeed, you get soldiers to guard it.”

Abel Fletcher gave a decided negative. The stern old Quaker held to his principles still.

“Then you must hide for a time—both of you. Come to my room. You will be secure there. Urge him, Phineas—for your sake and his own.”

But my poor father needed no urging. Grasping tightly both John’s arm and mine, which for the first time in his life he leaned on, he submitted to be led where we chose. And at length I stood again in Sally Watkins’s small attic.

Sally herself knew not of our entrance. She was out,

watching the rioters. Only Jem saw us, and his honour was safe as a rock.

"Now," said John, hastily smoothing the bed, so that my father might lie down, "you must both be very still. You may have to spend the night here. Jem will bring you your supper. You will make yourself easy, Abel Fletcher?"

"Ay." It was strange to see how decidedly yet resolutely John spoke, and how quietly my father answered him.

He clasped my hand, telling me to take care of myself also, and then declared he must be off.

"Whither?" said my father, rousing himself.

"To try and save the house and the tanyard—I fear we must give up the mill. No, don't hold me, Phineas. I run no risk: everybody knows me. Besides I am young. There! see after your father. I shall come back in good time." Another clasp of my hand, and he was gone. I heard his step descending the staircase. The room seemed to darken when he went away.

The evening passed slowly. My father lay on the bed and dozed. I examined John's room, which was greatly improved since last I had seen it. It was now a cosy bedchamber. There were shelves laden with books, most of a practical nature, though volumes of the great poets were among them. He evidently still practised the mechanical arts, in which he had always been deeply interested. There was lying in the window, a telescope, most ingeniously self-made. Other fragments of skilful handiwork, chiefly meant for machinery on a Lilliputian scale, were strewn on the floor; and on a chair stood a loom, very small in size, but perfect in its neat workmanship, with a few threads already woven into some fabric not so very unlike cloth.

"The lad works hard," said my father, whose eyes I found had started to follow mine. "He has useful hands and a clear head."

Evening began to close in, and whenever I opened the window, we heard ominous sounds from the town. Faithfully at supper time, Jem entered. But he could tell us no

news, and my father asked no questions. But when, in answer to a question of my own, Jem said he believed that "Mr. Halifax" intended to stop all night either at our house, or the tanyard, "for fear of a blaze", my father started—for well he knew what poor folk meant by a "blaze".

"My house—my tanyard—I must get up this instant—help me. That lad Halifax ought to come away." He tried to dress; but fell back, sick with exhaustion and pain. I made him lie down again on the bed.

"Phineas lad," he said brokenly, "thy old father is getting as helpless as thee!"

So we kept watch together as the long hours went by. Now and again my father muttered a hope that "the lad was safe". I said nothing, I only prayed.

After midnight I heard by my father's breathing that he was asleep. I could not sleep—all my faculties were preternaturally alive; my weak body felt stronger and more active than ever before. My father was a sound sleeper; I knew nothing would disturb him till morning; therefore my divided duty was at an end. I left him, and crept downstairs into Sally Watkins's kitchen. It was silent; only the faithful warder, Jem,—a big strong lad—dozed over the dull fire. I roused him and told him that I was going to seek Mr. Halifax. He looked astonished, begged me to stay. "Mr. Halifax had told him to guard us both." But my determination was fixed. I borrowed his ragged coat and hat—in them I knew I should not look conspicuous—and stole out along the dark alley into the street.

To my surprise, I found it deserted. If the rioters were still abroad, there was no sign of them here. On I ran, speeded by a dull murmur which I thought I heard; but still there was no one but the Abbey watchman, lounging in his box. I roused him, and asked if all was safe?—where were the rioters?

"What rioters?"

"At Abel Fletcher's mill; they may be at his house now."

"Ay, I think they be."

"And will no man in the town help him; no constables—no law?"

"Oh! he's a Quaker; the law don't help Quakers."

That was the truth—the hard, grinding truth—in those days. Liberty and justice were idle names to Nonconformists of every kind. Wasting no more words, I flew along the churchyard until I saw, shining against the boles of the chestnut trees, a red light. It was one of the hempen torches. At last I had got in the midst of "the rioters".

They were a mere handful—not above two score—but they were desperate. Wherever they had so far been ransacking, they had not as yet attacked my father's house; it stood on the other side of the road—barred, black and silent.

I heard a muttering—"Th'old man bean't there."
"Nobody knows where he be."—No, thank God!

"Be us all y'ere?" said the man with the torch, holding it up so as to see round him. Now I was thankful for my disguise, for no one appeared to notice me except one man, who skulked behind a tree, and of whom I was rather afraid, as he was apparently intent on watching.

"Ready, lads? Now for the rosin! Blaz'un out!"

But in the eager scuffle the torch, the only one alight, was knocked down and trodden out. A volley of oaths arose; but I missed my man from behind the tree—nor found him till after the angry throng had rushed on to the nearest lamp. Then he stepped right up to me, and as he did so I thought I recognized him, dark as it was.

"John?"

"Phineas? How could you——"

"I could do anything to-night. But thank God you are safe!" And I clung to his arm, my friend whom I had missed so long and so sorely. His grip answered my own.

"Now, Phineas, we have a minute's time. I must have you safe—we must get into the house."

"Who is there?"

"Jael. She is as good as a host of constables; she has braved

the fellows once to-night; but they'll be back again directly."

"And the mill?"

"Safe as yet, and I have some of the tanyard men on guard. I have been going to and fro all night, between here and there, waiting till the rioters should come back from the Severn Mills. Hist! here they are.—I say, Jael!"

He tapped at the window; and in a moment Jael had unbarred the door and admitted us. Then she closed it again, and mounted guard with something that looked very like my father's pistols, though I would not discredit her among our peaceful society by actually stating the fact.

"Bravo!" said John, when we stood all together in the barricaded house, and heard the threatening murmur of voices and feet outside. "Bravo, Jael! The wife of Heber the Kenite was no braver than you!"

She looked gratified, and followed John obediently from room to room.

"I have done all as thee bade me—thee art a sensible lad, John Halifax. We are secure, I think."

But how could we be secure against the danger that was threatening us now—fire?

"They can't mean it—surely they can't mean it," repeated John, as the cry of "Burn 'un out!" rose louder and louder.

But they did mean it. From the attic window we watched them light torch after torch. The light of them showed up, even more clearly than daylight had done, the gaunt, ragged forms and pinched faces, furious with famine. We recoiled at the miserable sight.

"I'll speak to them," John said. "Unbar the window, Jael," and before I could hinder, he was leaning right out—"Helloa, there!"

At his loud and commanding voice a wave of upturned faces surged forward, expectant.

"My men, do you know what you are about? To burn down a gentleman's house is—hanging."

"Not a Quaker's," was the derisive reply; "nobody'll get hanged for burning out a Quaker."

"That be true enough," muttered Jael between her teeth. "We must e'en fight, as Mordecai's people fought, hand to hand, until they slew their enemies."

"Fight! No, Jael!" said John. He turned to me. "Phineas, I'm going to try a new plan—at least, one so old that it's almost new. Whether it succeeds or not, you'll bear me witness that I did it for the best, because I thought it was right. Now for it."

To my horror, he returned to the window again and leaned out.

"My men, I want to speak to you."

He might as well have spoken to the roaring sea. The only answer was a shower of missiles, which missed their aim. The rioters were too far off—a spiked iron railing, eight feet high, being a barrier which none had yet ventured to climb. But one stone hit John on the chest. "Burn'un out! burn'un out! They be only Quakers," rose the cry, fiercer and louder than ever.

John withdrew his head from the window. "No use" he said, "I must try another way. There's not a moment to lose—Jael, is that a pistol?"

"Loaded," she said, handing it over to him with a stern delight (certainly Jael was not meant to be a Quaker). John ran downstairs, and before I had guessed his purpose, had unbolted the front door and was standing on the steps, in full view of the mob. I followed him out and stood close by, sheltered behind a pillar.

So sudden had been his act that even the rioters did not notice it, till the light of a torch showed them the young man standing with his back to the door—*outside* the door. The daring of his action fairly confounded them. But the storm raged too fiercely to be lulled, except for one brief minute. A confusion of voices burst out afresh.

"Who be thee?" "It's one o' the Quakers." "No, he bean't." "Burn'un anyhow." "Touch'un if ye dare." There was evidently a division arising. One big man, who had been very prominent all along, seemed trying to calm the tumult.

John stood his ground. Once a torch was flung at him—he stooped and picked it up, and stamped it out with his foot. The big fellow advanced to the gate and called John by his name. We recognized him as one of my father's own men from the tanyard.

"Is that you, Jacob Baines? I am sorry to see you here. What do you want?"

"Naught with thee. We wants Abel Fletcher. Where is 'un?"

"I shall certainly not tell you."

As John said this the noise rose again, and again Jacob Baines seemed to have power to quieten the rest. John never stirred. I caught many a stray sentence, such as "Don't hurt the lad." "He were kind to my lad, he were." "No, he be a real gentleman." "He came here as poor as us," and the like. At length one voice was heard above the rest.

"I zay, young man, didst ever know what it was to be pretty nigh vanished?"

"Ay, many a time."

The answer, so brief and unexpected, struck a great hush in the throng. Then the same voice cried:

"Speak up man! we won't hurt 'ee. Be you one of us."

"No, I am not one of you. I'd be ashamed to come in the night and burn my master's house down," was the fearless answer. "What do you do it for? All because he won't sell, or give you, his wheat. Even so—it is *his* not yours. May not a man do what he likes with his own?"

The argument seemed to strike home. "Don't you see how foolish you are? You all know that Mr. Fletcher is not a man to be threatened."

This seemed to be taken rather angrily; but John went on, as if not observing the fact.

"Nor am I to be threatened either. Look here—the first one who attempted to break into Mr. Fletcher's house I should most certainly have shot. But I have no wish to use violence, poor starving fellows. I know what hunger is. I'm sorry for you—from the bottom of my heart."

There was no mistaking the compassionate accent, nor the murmur which followed it.

"But what must us do, Mr. Halifax?" cried Jacob Baines: "us be starved a'most. What's the good of talking to we?"

John's countenance relaxed. "Suppose I gave you something to eat; would you listen to me afterwards?"

There arose a frenzied shout of assent. Poor wretches! they were fighting only for bare life. They would have bartered their very souls for a mouthful of bread.

"You must promise to be peaceable."

"Ay—ay! Some'at to eat; give us some'at to eat."

John Halifax called out to Jael, bade her bring him all the food that was in the house, and give it to him out of the parlour window. To my astonishment, she obeyed without argument. John unlocked the gate, and the famished men came thronging up the steps. The food was divided among them, and they fell to it like wild beasts. Meat, cooked or raw, loaves, vegetables, all came alike and were scrambled for in the fierce selfishness of hunger.

At length all the food in the house was consumed. John told them so, and they believed him. Little enough, indeed, was sufficient for some of them; wasted with long famine, they turned sick and faint, even with the bread in their mouths, and were unable to swallow it. Others gorged, lay on the steps, supine as satisfied brutes.

"Well, my men," said John, looking round with a smile, "have you had enough to eat?"

"Oh, ay," they all said. And one man added, "Thank the Lord!"

"That's right; and another time *trust* the Lord. You wouldn't then have been abroad this night, burning and rioting, bringing yourselves to the gallows, and your children to starvation."

"They be nigh that a'ready," said Jacob Baines sullenly. "Us men ha' gotten a meal, thanks be for it; but what'll become o' the little 'uns at home? Oh, Mr. Halifax, we must get food for them somehow."

John turned away very sad. Then, he called me aside, explained, and asked my consent, as Abel Fletcher's son, to a plan that had come into his mind. It was to write orders, which each man presenting at our mill should receive a certain amount of flour.

"Do you think your father would agree?"

"I think he would."

"Yes," John added, pondering—"I am sure he would. And besides, if he does not give some, he may lose all. No, he is a just man—I am not afraid. Give me some paper, Jael."

He sat down as composedly as if he had been in the counting-house, and wrote. At his request I signed the orders. They were distributed, and the men dispersed, blessing him—ay, and blessing Abel Fletcher too.

When the last of them had gone we went together to Sally Watkins's. We found my father still asleep. We woke him, and I told him the whole story—though without any comments on John's behaviour. I knew my friend would not have liked it; and, besides, the simple facts spoke for themselves. Abel Fletcher listened in silence, his face giving no indication of his feelings.

John asked him if he were satisfied.

"Quite satisfied."

But, having said this, he sat so long motionless that we became uneasy. At last he looked up, and held out his hand.

"Thee hast been a good lad, John, and a kind lad to us."

There was no answer, none. But all the words in the world could not match that happy silence.

By degrees we got my father home, for his foot was still very painful. It was just such another summer morning as the one, two years ago, when we two had stood, exhausted and trembling both, before that sternly bolted door.

He entered, leaning heavily on John. He sat down in the very seat, in the very room, where he had so harshly judged him. Something perhaps, of the bitterness he had felt then

rankled in the young man's spirit even now, for he stopped on the threshold.

"Come in," said my father, looking up.

"If I am welcome; not otherwise."

"Thee art welcome."

He came in—I drew him in—and sat down with us. But his manner was irresolute, his fingers closed and unclosed nervously. My father himself, as I very soon observed, was not unmoved. I stole up to him, and thanked him softly for the welcome he had given.

"There is nothing to thank me for," said he, with something of his old hardness. "What I did was only justice—or I then believed so. What I am about to do is still mere justice. John, how old art thee?"

"Twenty."

"Then for one year from this time I will take thee as my 'prentice, though thee knowst already nearly as much of the business as I do. At twenty-one thee wilt be able to set up for thyself, or I may take thee into partnership. We'll see. But——" and he looked sternly into John's eyes—"remember thee hast in some measure taken my own lad's place. May God deal with thee as thee dealest with my son, Phineas—my only son."

"Amen," was the solemn answer.

And God, who sees us both now—ay, *now!* and, perhaps, not so far apart as some may deem—He knows whether or not John Halifax kept that vow.

CHAPTER VI

THE experiences I have just described took their toll on me—I could not have expected otherwise—and for a month afterwards I was confined to my bed. But at last I found myself again up and about, and well on my way to recovery. Dr. Jessop, however, insisted that a change of air was needed. I was reluctant to leave my familiar home, where every night of my life had been spent; but when finally it was arranged that John Halifax should accompany me, riding in to Norton Bury twice a week to assist my father in the tanyard, most of my reluctance vanished.

Our destination was the village of Enderley, about eight miles away. We were to stay at a little house, named Rose Cottage, on the slope of Enderley Hill, which John himself had discovered for us. On a lovely August day we set out in a hired post-chaise. We lumbered slowly along, I leaning back, enjoying the fresh air and the changing views, and happy to see how intensely John enjoyed them too.

He looked extremely well to-day. He always dressed with extreme simplicity; but on this day, I remember, I noticed an especial carefulness of attire, at his age neither unnatural nor unbecoming. His well-fitting coat and long-flapped vest, garnished with the snowiest of lawn-frills and ruffles; his knee-breeches, black silk hose, and shoes adorned with the largest and brightest of steel buckles, made up a costume which, quaint as it would appear now, still is, to my mind, the most suitable and graceful a young man can wear. Once, with the natural sensitiveness of youth, he noticed my glance.

“Anything amiss about me, Phineas? You see I am not much used to holidays and holiday clothes.”

“I have nothing to say against either you or your clothes,” I answered smiling.

"That's all right; I beg to state that it is entirely in honour of you and Enderley that I have slipped off my tanyard husk and put on the gentleman."

"You couldn't do that, John. You couldn't put on what you were born with."

He laughed—but I think he was pleased. Any father, I thought, might have been proud of such a son, any sister of such a brother, any young girl of such a lover. Ay, that last tie, the only one of the three that was possible to *him*—I wondered how long it would be before times changed and I ceased to be the only one that was proud of him.

We were now on the top of the high moorland. We drove on a little farther till we came to its chief landmark—a quaint hostelry called "The Bear".

"Is this Enderley?" I asked.

"Not quite, but near it. You never saw the sea? Well, from this point I can show you something very like it." And he pointed to a gleaming bit in the landscape far away, where the Severn swelled to an estuary.

"This is Enderley Flat," he continued, "we shall come to its edge soon, where it drops abruptly into such a pretty valley. There, look down—that's the church. We are on a level with the top of its tower.—Take care, my lad"—to the post-boy who was crossing with difficulty the literally "pathless wastes"—"don't lurch us into the quarry pits, or topple us at once down the slope, where we shall roll over and over—*facilis descensus Averni*—and lodge in Mrs. Tod's garden hedge."

"Mrs. Tod would feel flattered if she knew Latin," said I smiling. "You don't look on our future habitation as a sort of Avernus, I hope?"

John laughed merrily. "No, I like Enderley Hill. I can't tell you why; but the moment I first set eyes on it I felt as if I had known the place before. I feel as if we were going to have great happiness here."

We wound a little way down the slope, and came in front of Rose Cottage. It was well-named. I never in my life had

seen such a bush of bloom. They hung in clusters—those roses—a dozen in a group; pressing their pinky cheeks together in a mass of family fragrance, pushing in at the parlour window, climbing up even to the very attic.

“How are you, Mrs. Tod?” cried John, as a comely, middle-aged body appeared at the door.

“I be pretty fair, sir—be you the same? The children have not forgotten you—you see, Mr. Halifax?”

“So much the better!” and he patted two or three little white heads, and tossed the youngest high up into the air. It looked very strange to see John with a child in his arms.

“Don’t ’ee make more noise than ’ee can help, my lad,” the good woman said to our post-boy, “because, sir”—to John—“the sick gentleman I told you of bean’t so well again to-day.”

“I am sorry for it. We would not have driven up to the door had we known. Which is his room?”

Mrs. Tod pointed to a window, not on our side of the house, but on the other. A hand was just closing the casement and pulling down the blind—a hand which, from the momentary glimpse we had of it, seemed less like a man’s than a woman’s.

When we were settled in the parlour John remarked on the fact. “It was the wife, most likely. Poor thing! how hard to be shut up indoors on such an evening as this.”

It did seem a sad sight—that closed window, outside which was the fresh, balmy air, the sunset, and the roses.

“And how do you like Enderley?” asked John, when tea being over, I lay and rested, while he sat by the rose-framed window-sill.

“It is very, very pretty, and so comfortable—almost like home.”

“I feel as if it were home,” said John, half to himself.

“That Mrs. Tod is an extraordinary woman—a most extraordinary woman,” said John.

It was two days later, and he sat leaning his elbows on the

table, from which the said extraordinary woman had just removed our breakfast.

"Wherefore, John?"

"She has a house full of children, yet manages to keep it quiet—and her own temper likewise. Astonishing patience! How people can manage it with brats, I can't imagine."

"John! that's mean hypocrisy. I saw you myself half an hour ago holding the eldest Tod boy on a refractory donkey, and laughing till you could hardly stand."

"Did I?" said he, half ashamed. "Well, it was only to keep the little scamp from making a noise under the windows. And that reminds me of another astonishing virtue in Mrs. Tod—she can hold her tongue. In two whole days she has not communicated to us a single fact concerning our neighbours in the other half of Rose Cottage."

"Did you want to know?"

John laughingly denied; then allowed that he always had a certain pleasure in eliciting information on men and things.

"The wife being indicated, I suppose, by that very complimentary word 'thing'?" said I smiling.

"Wife? Do not jump to conclusions, Phineas. When I was walking across the Flat this morning, I saw her—this unknown individual—walking ahead of me. I knew it must be her because she was wearing the grey gown I saw hanging out yesterday in Mrs. Tod's kitchen. I kept a good way behind—she might not like to be watched or followed. She was carrying a little basket—eggs, I fancy."

"Capital housekeeper! Excellent wife!"

"I have my doubts on that latter point. She walked a good deal quicker and merrier than any wife ought to walk when her husband is ill. And Mrs. Tod always calls her invalid 'the old gentleman'."

"Nay, old men do sometimes marry young women."

"Yes, but it is always a pity; and sometimes not quite right. I am sure she is not old—and somehow I don't believe she's married either."

"Did you see her face?" I asked.

"Of course not," he answered rather indignantly. "I should not think it manly to chase a lady as a school boy does a butterfly. I stayed on the top of the Flat till she had gone indoors."

"Into Rose Cottage?"

"Why—yes."

"She had doubtless gone to fetch new-laid eggs for her hus—I mean for the sick gentleman's breakfast. Kind soul!"

"You may jest, Phineas, but I think she *is* a kind soul. On her way home, I saw her stop twice; once to speak to an old woman who was gathering sticks; and again to scold a lad for thrashing a donkey."

I was much amused by his interest in the unknown lady; but there was no opportunity to pursue the subject, for at that moment our tête-à-tête was disturbed by the cries of a child.

"Bless my life!" said John, looking out of the window. "It's my namesake, Jack. I knew he would come to grief with that donkey. Hey, lad! never mind. Get up!"

But he soon perceived that the accident was more serious; and disappeared like a shot, leaping out through the open window. The next moment I saw him carrying the unlucky Jack, who was bleeding from a cut on the forehead, and screaming vociferously.

"Don't be frightened, Mrs. Tod, it's very slight. Jack, my lad, be a man! Don't scream so; you alarm your mother."

But as soon as the good woman was satisfied that there was no real cause for terror, her anxiety changed into a hearty wrath against Jack for being so careless, and for giving so much trouble to the gentleman.

"But he be always getting into mischief, sir—that boy. Three months back, the very day Mr. March came, he got playing with the carriage horse, and it kicked him and broke his arm. A deal he cares! As I say to Tod—it bean't no use fretting over *that* boy."

Jack was carried into Mrs. Tod's kitchen, where his wound was washed and his forehead bandaged. I had followed them

in to witness the operation, and it was almost completed when the latch of the door was opened, and a lady stood on the threshold.

"Mrs. Tod, my father says——"

Seeing strangers, the lady paused. At the sound of her voice—a pleasant voice, though somewhat quick and decided in tone—John and I both involuntarily turned. We felt awkward; doubtful whether to stay or retire abruptly. She saved us the choice.

"Mrs. Tod, my father will take his soup at eleven. You will remember?"

"Yes, Miss March."

Upon which the door was shut and she vanished.

She wore a grey silken gown. I glanced at John, but he did not see me; his eyes were fixed on the door, which had disclosed and concealed the momentary picture. Its momentariness impressed it the more vividly on my memory. I have it still.

A girl, in early but not precocious maturity, rather tall, of a figure built more for activity and energy than the mere fragility of sylph-like grace: dark-complexioned, dark-eyed, dark-haired—the whole colouring being of that soft darkness of tone which gives a sense of something at once warm and tender, strong and womanly. "Pretty" would have been the last word to apply to her; but there was about her an atmosphere of freshness, health and youth, pleasant as a spring breeze.

"That is Miss March," said our landlady, when she had disappeared.

"Is it?" removing his eyes from the shut door.

"She be very sensible-like, for a young body of seventeen; more sensible and pleasanter than her father, who is always ailing, and always grumbling. He can't help it, I dare say; but it be terrible hard for the daughter, sir."

"Very," said John. His laconism was extraordinary.

"There bean't a pleasanter young creature alive," continued Mrs. Tod warmly. "When her father's asleep she'll often

come here, into the kitchen—just as you did, sir—and sit talking to Tod and me, and playing with the baby.”

“So, John,” I said, when we had returned to our own room, “your lady in the grey gown is discovered at last. She’s young, certainly, but not exactly a beauty.”

“I never said she was, Phineas.”

“A pleasant person, though: hearty, cheerful-looking, and strong. I can easily imagine her trotting over the common with her basket of eggs—chatting to the old woman, and scolding the naughty boy.”

“Don’t make fun of her. She must have a hard life with her old father.”

Of course, seeing him take it up so seriously, I jested no more.

“By-the-bye, did not the father’s name strike you? *March*—Suppose it turns out to be the very Mr. March you pulled out of the Severn five years ago. What a romantic conjuncture of circumstances.”

“Nonsense,” said John quickly—more quickly than he usually spoke to me. He looked at his watch. “Well, old fellow,” he said in his usual tones, “I must get on.” (This was a day when he was bound to go to Norton Bury.) “Look after yourself. It will be nightfall before I am back.” I assured him that I should be perfectly content resting in the sunshine, and perhaps afterwards on taking a little walk. A moment later I watched him mount, ride slowly down the bit of common, turning once to look back at Rose Cottage—and finally disappear between the chestnut trees. It was a goodly sight—for he was an admirable horseman.

It was nine o’clock in the evening before I heard him returning; joyfully I ran out.

John was not quite his gay youthful self that night. He was very tired, and had what he called “the tanyard feeling”, the oppression of business cares.

“Times are hard,” said he, when we had finally shut out the starlight, and Mrs. Tod had lit candles, and bade us good night. “I don’t see how your father can rightly be left with

so many anxieties on his shoulders. Two days is not enough, Phineas. I must manage to get to Norton Bury at least five days a week. You will have solitude enough, I fear."

"And you will have very little of the pleasant country holiday you had planned."

"Never mind—perhaps it is good for me. I have a life of hard work before me, and can't afford to get used to too much pleasure. But we'll make the most of every bit of time we have. How have you felt to-day? Strong?"

"Very strong. To-morrow is Sunday. You will not have to go to Norton Bury then. What would you like us to do?"

"I want to show you the common in early morning—the view there is lovely."

"Of nature, or human nature?"

He half smiled, though only at my mischievousness. I could see it did not affect him in the least. "Nay, I know what you mean; but she was not on my mind just then. We will go another way, as indeed I had intended; it might annoy the young lady, our meeting her again."

His grave, easy manner of treating and dismissing the subject was a tacit reproach to me. I let the matter drop; we had much more serious topics afloat than gossip about our neighbours.

At seven next morning we were out on the Flat. Saying that there was a view he wished me to see, we went forward till the valley lay below us. It was like a moat, or as if some broad river had been dried up in its course, and, century after century, gradually converted into meadow, woodland, and town. For a little, white town sat demurely at the bottom of the hollow, and a score or two of white cottages scattered themselves from this small nucleus of civilization over the opposite bank of this imaginary river, which was now a lovely hillside.

"Do you like this, Phineas? I do very much. A dear, smiling, English valley, holding many a little nest of an English home. Fancy being patriarch over such a region, having the whole region in one's hand, to do good to, or ill.

You can't think what primitive people there are hereabouts—descendants from an old colony of Flemish cloth-weavers: they keep to the trade. Down in the valley—if one could see through the beech tree—is the grand support of the neighbourhood, a large cloth-mill.”

“That's quite in your line, John,” said I, remembering the interest he had always shown in weaving—and remembering also the little model loom I had seen in the attic room at Sally Watkins's.

“This is such a fine mill, Phineas,” he continued; “I have been all over it. But it needs modern machinery. The owner keeps to the old ways. Now, if that mill were mine——”

As we walked home he warmed to his subject, and, though I knew that machinery had always fascinated him, I was astonished both at his knowledge, and at the fertility of his imagination. But suddenly he was brought up stock still by the sight of another person some distance ahead of us, picking the wild hare-bells. There was no mistaking the grey dress.

“Miss March,” said I smiling. “There's certainly a fatality about your meeting her.”

“Not in the least. She had taken her morning walk in a different direction, as I did. Come away down the slope. We must not intrude on the lady's enjoyments.”

He carried me off, much against my will, for I had a great wish to see again that fresh, young face, so earnest, cheerful and good. Fate, however, kinder than he, took the knot of etiquette into her own hands, and broke it. Close to the cottage door, our two paths converging, and probably our breakfast hours likewise, brought us face to face with Miss March.

But we and our contiguity were not of the smallest importance to her. She showed no sign of embarrassment as she looked at us for a moment. Of course no recognition passed, but there was a merry dimple about her mouth, as if she knew quite well who we were, and owned to a little harmless feminine curiosity in observing us.

As we met by the door, John raised his eyes, as was natural enough. For me, I could hardly take mine from her, such a pleasant creature was she to behold. She half smiled—he bowed, which she returned, courteously; we stood aside, and she passed before us into the house. I told John that this was a good beginning of acquaintance with our neighbour.

“Not at all, no acquaintance; a mere civility between two people living under the same roof. It will never be more.”

“Probably not.”

I am afraid John was disappointed at my “probably”. “It is a good noble face,” I continued. “She bows with remarkable grace too. I think, John, for the first time in our lives, we may say we have seen a *lady*.”

“Most certainly a lady.”

“Nay, I only meant that, girl as she is, she is evidently accustomed to what is called ‘society’. Which makes it more likely than ever that her father is the Mr. March who was cousin to the Brithwoods. An odd coincidence.”

“A very odd coincidence.”

After which brief reply John lapsed into taciturnity.

More than once that morning, we returned to the subject of our neighbours. And when Mrs. Tod was removing the breakfast, I ventured to ask her a harmless question or two about them. Mr. March, she told us, was a gentleman of independent property—he had no friends hereabouts, and he usually lived in Wales.

“He cannot be our Mr. March, then,” I said when we were once more alone.

“No,” said John, with an air of great relief. It was plain that his interest in that charming and personable young woman, his daughter, had become very great indeed.

A week slipped by. We had grown familiar with Enderley Hill—at least I had. John, absent most days at Norton Bury, had little time to enjoy the pretty spot to which he had taken such a fancy.

With me one day went by just like another. In the morn-

ings I crept out, climbed the hill above Rose Cottage garden, and there lay, in a sunny shelter, a little under the verge of the Flat. Here I read, or watched the ants running in and out of the numerous ant-hills there.

Being out of doors almost all day, I saw little of the inhabitants of our cottage. Once or twice a lady and gentleman passed, creeping at the foot of the slope so slowly, that I felt sure it must be Mr. March and his daughter. He was a tall man with grey hair; I was not near enough to distinguish his features. She walked on the farther side, supporting him with her arm.

That he was a very sick man was evident. Some days he was confined to his bed; and Mrs. Tod was for ever anxious lest her children should make too much noise, for, Mr. March, she confided to me, was a very difficult gentleman.

Sunday came again. John and I had determined to make it a lovely country Sunday; so we began it at 6 a.m. John took me a new walk across the common, where, he said—in answer to my question—we were quite certain *not* to meet Miss March. I asked him whether he had met her again in the course of the walks he always took before breakfast.

"She has never once seen me."

"But you have seen her? Answer honestly?"

"Why should I not? Yes, I have seen her—once or twice or so—but never in any way that could annoy her."

"Ah! John; that explains why you have become so well-acquainted with her walks."

He coloured deeply. "I hope, Phineas, you do not think that—that in any way I should intrude on or offend a lady?"

"Nay, don't take it so seriously. I was but teasing. It would be quite natural if a young man like you did use some pains to look upon anyone so pleasant. But"—more seriously—"it would grieve me very much if you were to become unsettled, as young men do when they take fancies. She is not of our world."

"I know that, Phineas. Don't worry. I do admire her; but I have seen her only five times; I never spoke to her in my

life, and most probably never shall do so. Could anyone be in a safer position? Besides," and his tone changed to extreme gravity, "I have too many worldly cares to think of—to—to be able to afford the harmless little amusement of falling in love."

The long quiet Sunday, spent mostly in the open-air, passed away. At ten o'clock—just when we were contemplating another stroll before going to bed—Mrs. Tod came mysteriously into our parlour and shut the door after her. Her round fresh face looked troubled.

"Mr. Halifax, might I speak a word to 'ee, sir?"

"With pleasure. Sit down, Mrs. Tod. There's nothing wrong with your children?"

"No, I thank'ee. You are very kind, sir. No, it be about that poor Miss March."

I could see John's finger twitch over the chair he was leaning on. "I hope——" he began, and stopped.

"Her father's dreadful bad to-night, and it's a good seven mile to walk to the doctor at S——; and Miss March says—that is, she don't, for I bean't going to tell her a word about it—but I think, Mr. Halifax, if I might make so bold, it would be a great kindness in a young gentleman like you to lend Tod your mare to ride over and fetch the doctor."

"I will gladly. At once?"

"Tod bean't come in yet."

"He shall have the mare the moment he does. It was very right of you to come to us in this way, Mrs. Tod. Really, it would be almost a treat to be ill in your house—you are so kind."

"Thank'ee, Mr. Halifax," said the honest landlady, greatly delighted. "But a body couldn't help doing anything for Miss March. You would think so yourself, if you knew her."

"No doubt," returned John, more politely than warmly, I fancied, as he closed the door after the retreating figure of Mrs. Tod. But when she had gone, I saw he was very thoughtful, and he did not repeat his suggestion that we should take another walk.

"Phineas," he said at length, "I think I'll go myself."

"Where?"

"To fetch Dr. Brown. If Tod is not come in it would be but a common charity."

"But the dark night?"

"Oh, no matter. I know the way; and the mare will be safer under me than under a stranger."

Smiling a little at his eagerness, I agreed it was right and proper he should do it.

"Then shall I call Mrs. Tod and inquire? Or perhaps it might be less fuss just to go and speak to her in the kitchen. Will you, Phineas, or shall I?"

Scarcely waiting my answer, he walked from the parlour into what I had come to call the Debatable Land—the passage dividing the two parts of the house. I followed. But as we entered the kitchen, Mrs. Tod appeared at the door leading to the opposite half. She was apparently speaking to Miss March on the staircase. We heard again those clear, decided tones, but subdued to a half-whisper.

"No, Mrs. Tod, I am not sorry you did it—on my father's account, 'tis best. Tell Mr.—the young gentleman—I forget his name—that I am very much obliged to him."

"I will Miss March.—Stay, he is just here.—Bless us! she has shut the door already. Won't you sit down, sirs. You are always welcome in my kitchen." And Mrs. Tod bustled about, well aware what a cheerful old-fashioned kitchen hers was.

But when John explained the reason for our intrusion there was no end to her gratitude.

"Bless me!" she exclaimed, "if you're not the kindest young gentleman that ever lived. The very day you came here, hunting for lodgings, I said to Miss March, 'Miss,' I said, 'who Mr. Halifax may be I don't know, but depend upon it he's a real gentleman.'"

I was the sole amused auditor of this speech, for John had already vanished on his mission.

He was back—and the doctor with him—in a wonderfully

short time. They parted at the gate, and he came into our parlour, his cheeks all glowing with the exercise.

"Phineas," he said, "it is one o'clock. You ought to have been in bed hours ago. Will you not go? I shall sit up just a little while, to hear how Mr. March is."

"I should like to hear too. It is curious the interest one takes in strangers, when shut up together in a lonely place like this, especially when they are in trouble."

"Ay, that's it," said he quickly. "It's the solitude, and their being in trouble. Did you hear anything more while I was away?"

"Only that Mr. March was better, and everybody had gone to bed but his daughter and Mrs. Tod."

A few minutes later we heard the doctor leaving.

"Poor Miss March! Poor young thing!" I said. "Has she no relatives—no brothers or sisters?"

"I have not liked to ask Mrs. Tod that. But I fancy not. However that's not my business. My business is to get you off to bed as soon as possible."

"Wait a minute, John. Let us go and see if we can do anything more."

In the kitchen all was quiet, but we heard low talking, and presently stealthy footsteps crept downstairs. It was Mrs. Tod and Miss March, and before we could remove ourselves they entered the room.

She came and stood by the fire, not at first seeing us. Her cheeks were pale with weariness and watching.

"I think he is better, Mrs. Tod—decidedly better," said she, speaking quickly. "You ought to go to bed now. I hope you told Mr.—Oh——"

She saw us, stopped, and for the moment the faintest tinge of colour returned. Presently she acknowledged us, with a slight bow.

John came forward. I had expected some awkwardness on his part; but no—he was thinking too little of himself for that. His demeanour was the essence of all manly courtesy.

"I hope, madam—I do hope that Mr. March is better. We were unwilling to retire till we had heard."

"Thank you! My father is much better. You are very kind," said Miss March, with a maidenly dropping of the eyes.

"Indeed he is kind," broke in Mrs. Tod. "He rode all the way to S——, his own self, to fetch the doctor."

"Did you, sir? I thought you only lent the horse."

"Oh! I like a night-ride. And you are sure, madam, that your father is better? Is there nothing else I can do for you?"

His sweet, grave manner, so much older and graver than his years, softened too by his quiet deference, seemed entirely to reassure her. These, and her own frankness of character, conquered all trammels of formal custom. She held out her hand to him.

"I thank you very much, Mr. Halifax. If I wanted help I would ask you; indeed I would."

"Thank *you*. Good night."

He pressed the hand with reverence and was gone. I saw Miss March look after him; then she turned to speak to me. A light word, an easy smile, as to a poor invalid she had often pitied out of the depth of her womanly heart.

Soon I followed John into the parlour. He asked me no questions, made no remarks, only took his candle and went upstairs.

But years afterwards, he confessed to me that the touch of that soft hand had been to him like a revelation of a new world.

CHAPTER VII

THE next day John rode away rather earlier than usual. Mrs. Tod had told us that Mr. March was much better. I had a long quiet day alone in the beech wood, close by. When I came home in the warm evening Miss March stood in front of the cottage, with—strange to say—her father.

Seeing my coming, Miss March whispered to him—he turned to me with a listless gaze from over his fur collar, and bowed languidly without rising from his easy-chair. Yes, it was Mr. March—the very Mr. March we had met! I knew him, changed as he was; but he did not know me in the least, as, indeed, was not likely.

His daughter came a step or two to meet me, inquired after my own health, and then turned to introduce me to her father. “This is Mr. Fletcher, sir, the gentleman who——”

“Was so obliging as to ride to S—— last night for me? Allow me to thank him myself.”

I began to disclaim, and Miss March to explain; but we must both have been rather incoherent, for I think the poor gentleman was never quite clear as to who it was that went for Dr. Brown. However that mattered little, as his acknowledgments were evidently dictated more by a natural habit of courtesy than by any strong sense of service rendered.

“I am a very great invalid, sir—— My dear, will you explain to the gentleman.” And he leaned his head back wearily.

“My father has never recovered from his ten years’ residence in the West Indies.”

“‘Residence’? Pardon me, my dear, you forget that I was Governor of——”

“Oh, yes. The climate is very trying there, Mr. Fletcher. But since he has been in England—five years—he has been very much better. I hope he will be quite well in time.”

Mr. March shook his head drearily. Poor melancholy man! the world to him seemed to have melted down into a mere nebula. What a life for any young creature, thought I, to be bound to him!

"Mr. Fletcher is an invalid too, Father," she said, so gently that I could feel no pain at her noticing my infirmity; and I took gratefully the seat she gave me beside her father. I asked Miss March if she had liked the West Indies, but she told me she had never been there. "Papa was obliged to leave me behind in Wales—poor mamma's country. Were you ever in Wales? I like it so. Indeed, I feel as if I belonged altogether to the mountains." And as she said this, she looked the very incarnation of the mountain spirit.

In retiring, with her father leaning on her arm, she turned and asked me if she could lend me any books. I assented with thanks; and shortly afterwards she brought me a whole armful of literature.

"I have not time to study much myself," said she in answer to my questions; "but I like those who do. Now, good evening, for I must run. You and your friend can have any book of ours. You must not think"—and she turned back to tell me this—"that because my father said little, he and I are not deeply grateful for the kindness Mr. Halifax showed us last night."

"It was a pleasure to John—it always is—to do a kind office for anyone."

"I can well believe that, Mr. Fletcher," and she left me.

When John came home I informed him of what had passed. He listened, though he made no comment whatever. But all the evening he sat turning over Miss March's books, and reading fragments either aloud or to himself.

The next day—one when he did not go to Norton Bury—he was in a curious mood. Dreamy, lazy, mild; he sat poring indoors, instead of roaming abroad—in truth, a changed lad. It was not till the afternoon that he submitted to be led down to the beech wood.

Coming back, I took him a new way, through the prettiest

meadow—half field, half orchard—where the trees were loaded with the ripening apples. Under one of these, as we climbed the slope, we saw a vacant table laid. And a moment later Miss March came into view, leading her father towards it. They were approaching the gate that led into the meadow. In a few moments our path must cross theirs.

“’Tis useless to escape them,” whispered I to John.

“I do not wish it—why should I?” Precisely at the gate we met, and John held it open for father and daughter to pass through. She looked up and acknowledged him, smiling. I thought that smile and his courteous, but far less frank, response to it, would have been all the greeting; but no! Mr. March’s dull perceptions seemed somehow to have brightened. He stopped.

“Mr. Halifax, I believe?”

John bowed. They stood for one moment looking at each other; the tall stalwart young man and the sickly older one, prematurely broken down.

“Sir,” said the elder, and in his intent gaze I fancied I detected something more than curiosity; “sir, I have to thank you.”

“Indeed, no thanks are needed. I sincerely hope you are better to-day.”

Mr. March assented; but John’s countenance apparently interested him so much that he forgot his usual complainings. “My daughter tells me that you are our neighbours—I am happy to have such friendly ones.—My dear,” in an audible half whisper, “I think your poor brother Walter, had he lived, would have grown up extremely like Mr.—Mr.—”

“Mr. Halifax, Papa.”

“Mr. Halifax, we are going to take tea under the trees. Will you and your friend give us the pleasure of your company?”

Of course we assented: I considerably amused, and not ill-pleased, to see how naturally it fell out that when John appeared on the scene, I, Phineas, subsided at once into the secondary character of John’s “friend”.

We soon found ourselves established under the apple tree. John sat opposite to Miss March—I by her side—she had placed me there. She poured into small white china cups that dainty luxury tea; and conversation was soon flowing with surprising ease. But it struck me as strange, that though *her* manner to us both was thoroughly frank and kind, it was a shade more easy with *me*. Strange also, that while she chatted gaily with me, John almost entirely confined his talk to her father.

But the young lady listened—ay, undoubtedly she listened—to every word that was said. I did not wonder at it: when his tongue was unloosed, few people could talk better than John Halifax. Not that he was one of your showy conversationalists; but all that he said was well said and to the point; he knew when to speak and when to be silent.

We talked a good deal about Wales; and Miss March told us many an innocent tale of her life there, and of her dear old governess, whose name, she mentioned, was Cardigan. Her mother having died when she was a very small child, she had apparently grown up in this lady's care, and was much attached to her.

"My dear," at last said Mr. March, rather testily, "you make too much of our excellent Jane Cardigan. She is going to be married, next month, and will not care for you now."

"Hush, Papa, that is a secret at present. Pray, Mr. Halifax, do you know Norton Bury?"

The abruptness of the question startled John, so that he only answered in a hurried affirmative. Indeed, Mr. March left him no time for further explanation.

"I hate the place. My late wife's cousins, the Brithwoods of the Mythe, with whom I have had—ahem!—strong political differences—live there. And I was once nearly drowned in the Severn close by."

"Papa, don't speak of that please," said Miss March hurriedly; so hurriedly that she did not notice John's sudden and violent colour. But the flush died down again—he never

spoke a word. And, of course, acting by his evident desire, neither did I.

"For my part," continued the young lady, "I have no dislike to Norton Bury."

"You have been there?" Though it was the simplest question, John's sudden look at her, and the soft implication of his voice struck me as peculiar.

"Once when I was about twelve years old. But we will talk of something Papa likes better. Hark! how the doves are cooing in the beech-wood."

I asked her if she had ever explored the wood, and seen the pretty little stream that ran through it.

"Never. I have generally taken my walks across the Flat," she replied smiling, and then blushing at having done so—the faintest blush imaginable.

Mr. March settled himself to laziness and his armchair; I too became silent, and the talk was left to the two others. It was enough for me to sit listening, as gradually, under the influence of that simple, solitary place, they became more friendly. How young they both looked; how happy in their frank, free youth, with the sun-rays slanting down on them.

At length I suggested to Miss March that, as we were so close, she might like to see the beech-wood. For I knew that John would like that, though he was too great a hypocrite to second my proposal by a single word. Miss March was more single-minded, or else had no reason for being contrary. She agreed to my plan with childish eagerness, and after receiving her father's assurance that he would not mind her leaving him for five minutes, she asked me to accompany her there.

"And I will stay beside Mr. March, that he may not be left alone," said John.

What did the lad do that for? Why did he sit watching us so intently as we passed down the meadow, and into the wood? It passed my comprehension.

The young girl walked with me, talking with perfect

simplicity and frankness. She talked to me a good deal about myself, asking what I did all day—and if I were not rather dull sometimes in this solitary country lodging. I told her I never found it so.

"But then you have your friend. I should be very dull if I had time to think about it. It is hard to be an only child.—Has Mr. Halifax any brothers or sisters?"

"None. No relatives living."

"Ah!" A compassionate ejaculation. "You and he seem greatly attached to each other."

"John is brother, friend, everything I have in the world."

"Is he? He must be very good. Indeed, he looks so," observed Miss March thoughtfully. "And I believe—at least I have often heard—that good men are rare."

I had no time to enter into that momentous question before the origin of it himself appeared, breaking through the bushes to join us. He apologized for doing so, saying that Mr. March had sent him, as he wished now to return home.

"What terrible revelations has this friend of mine been making to you, Miss March? For I heard my own name as I approached you."

He spoke gaily; but I fancied he looked uneasy. The young lady only laughed.

"I have a great mind not to tell you, Mr. Halifax."

"Not when I ask you?"

He spoke so seriously that she could not choose but reply. "Mr. Fletcher was telling me three simple facts. First, that you are an orphan, without relatives. Secondly, that you are his dearest friend. Thirdly—well, I never compromise truth—that you are good."

"And you?"

"The first I was ignorant of; the second I had already guessed; the third——" He gazed at her intently. "The third I had likewise—not doubted."

John made some hurried acknowledgment. He looked pleased—nay, more than pleased—happy, as we all turned and walked back to rejoin her father.

When we took leave of our acquaintances, Mr. March was extremely courteous, and declared that our society would always be a pleasure to him and his daughter.

"He always says so formally, 'my daughter,'" I observed, as John and I walked home. "I wonder what her Christian name is?"

"I believe it is Ursula."

"How did you find it out?"

"It is written in one of her books."

"Ursula!" I repeated, wondering where I had heard it before, "a pretty name."

"A very pretty name."

When John fell into this echoing mood I always found it best to fall into taciturnity.

Next day the rain poured incessantly, sweeping blindingly across the hills. The weather had apparently broken up, even thus early in the autumn; and for that day, and several following days, we had nothing but wind, rain and storm.

John went to Norton Bury every day that week. His mind seemed restless.—He was doubly kind and attentive to me; but every night I heard him go out in all the storm to walk upon the common. I longed to follow him, but it was best not.

On the Saturday morning, coming to breakfast, I heard him ask Mrs. Tod how Mr. March was, for we knew he had been ailing all the week. She shook her head ominously. "He is very bad, sir; badder than ever, I think. She sits up with him the best part of every night."

"I imagined so. I have seen her light burning."

"Law, Mr. Halifax! you don't be walking abroad of nights on the Flat? It's terrible bad for your health." Mrs. Tod never disguised the fact that John was her favourite lodger.

"Thank you for considering my health," he replied smiling. "Only tell me, Mrs. Tod, can anything be done for that poor gentleman?"

"Nothing, sir—thank'ee all the same."

"If he should get worse, let me go for Dr. Brown. I shall be at home all to-day."

Mrs. Tod repeated her thanks and left us.

"Were you not going to Norton Bury to-day, John?"

"I was; but—— Well, you may as well know it. I met Dr. Brown on the road just now, and he told me that Mr. March cannot live more than a few days—perhaps only a few hours. And she does not know it."

He leaned on the mantelpiece. I could see he was much affected. At length he said suddenly:

"Phineas, that poor young lady is all alone in the world. I think it is wicked, downright wicked, for a doctor to be afraid of telling a patient he is going to die—and even more wicked to keep the friends in ignorance until the last stunning blow falls. She ought to be told; she must be told. For such a stroke she ought to be a little prepared. It might kill her else.—Do you not think she ought to be told, Phineas?"

"Most decidedly. They might get further advice."

"That would be vain. Dr. Brown says it is a hopeless case, has been so for long. But he would not believe it, or have his daughter told. He clings to life desperately."

"You think most of her."

"I do," he said firmly. "He is reaping what he has sown, poor man! God knows, I pity him. But she is as good as an angel from heaven."

It was evident that, somehow or other, John had learned a good deal about the father and daughter. However, now was not the time to question him. For at the moment, through the opened doors, we heard faint moans that pierced the whole house, and too surely they came from the sick—possibly, the dying man. Mrs. Tod, who had been seeing Dr. Brown to his horse, now entered our parlour with swollen eyes.

"Oh, Mr. Halifax!" and the kind soul burst out crying afresh. John made her sit down, and gave her a glass of wine. "Poor Mr. March," she continued, as soon as she had regained sufficient control of herself to speak: "I didn't like

him very much alive, but I do feel so sorry now that he's dying."

Then he *was* dying. "Does his daughter know?" I asked.

"No—no—I dare not tell her. Nobody dare."

"Does she not guess it?"

"No, not a bit. Poor young lady! She's seen him so often in these attacks, and she fancies that this one will pass off like the others."

We all sat silent, and then John said, in a low voice, "Mrs. Tod, she ought to be told, and you would be the best person to tell her."

Poor Mrs. Tod, however, recoiled from such a task. John was again silent. "If you like," he said at last, "I will tell her myself."

Mrs. Tod overwhelmed him with thankfulness.

"How shall I meet her then? If it were done as if by chance it would be best."

"I'll manage it somehow. The house is very quiet. I've sent all the children away, except the baby. The baby'll comfort her, poor dear, afterwards." And, again drying her honest eyes, Mrs. Tod ran out of the room.

Hour by hour the long day passed by, the driving rain outside still continuing. From time to time Mrs. Tod came to us with mournful face, to inform us "how things went on."

It was nearly dusk when she hurried in to tell us that Mr. March was asleep, and that his daughter was "drinking a cup" by the kitchen fire. "You must go now," she said; "she'll not stop five minutes."

"I will," he answered; but he turned frightfully pale. He turned to me, "Oh, Phineas," he said, "if there were anyone but me to tell her this!"

But he went out without hesitating. I did not follow him; but I heard afterwards, both from himself and from Mrs. Tod, what transpired.

She was standing so absorbed that she did not notice his entrance. She looked years older and sadder. When she

turned and spoke to John, it was with a manner also changed. Trouble had put aside all hesitation and shyness.

"Thank you; my father is indeed seriously ill. I am in great trouble, you see, though Mrs. Tod is very, very kind. Don't cry, dear Mrs. Tod." She laid her hand on the good woman's shoulder. "Why does she sob so, Mr. Halifax?" looking at him with troubled eyes. "Papa will be better to-morrow, I am sure."

"I *hope* so," he answered, dwelling on the word: "we should always hope to the last."

"The last?" with a quick, startled gaze.

"And then we can only trust."

Something more than the mere words struck her. She examined him closely for a minute.

"You mean—yes—I understand what you mean. But you are mistaken. The doctor would have told me—if—if——" She shivered, and left the sentence unfinished.

"Dr. Brown was afraid—we were all afraid," broke in Mrs. Tod, sobbing. "Only Mr. Halifax, he said——"

Miss March turned abruptly to John. That woeful gaze of hers could be answered by no words. But his pitying, yet steady and comforting expression told all. I believe he took her hand, and for a moment they stood thus, looking into each other's eyes. Then she broke away and flew upstairs. John came in again to me and sat down. He did not speak for many minutes.

After an interval—I cannot remember how long—we heard Mrs. Tod calling loudly for Mr. Halifax. We both ran through the empty kitchen to the foot of the stairs that led to Mr. March's room. Mrs. Tod sat half-way down the staircase, holding Ursula March across her knees. The poor soul was insensible, or nearly so. We learned that soon after her return to her father's room, he had passed away in his sleep.

John took her in his arms, carried her into our own little parlour, and laid her down on the sofa.

"Shut the door, Phineas. Mrs. Tod, keep everybody out. She is waking now."

She did indeed open her eyes, with a long sigh, but closed them again. Then with an effort she sat upright and looked at us all around.

"Oh, my dear, my dear!" moaned Mrs. Tod, clasping her, and sobbing over her like a child. "Cry, do cry! It will make you feel so much better."

"I *can't*," she said, and lay down again. We stood awed, watching that poor, pale face, on every line of which was written stunned, motionless, impassive grief.

"She must be roused," said John at last. "She *must* cry. Mrs. Tod take her upstairs. Let her look at her father."

The words effected what he had desired; what almost her life demanded. The floodgates of grief were opened at last, and she clung to Mrs. Tod in torrents of weeping.

"Now, Phineas, let us go away."

And he went, walking like one blindfolded, straight out of the house, I following him.

Looking back at this time, and at the days that followed Mr. March's death, it is impossible not to see the hand of fate at work. Miss March was left friendless, and, Mrs. Tod believed, almost penniless. She could not, or would not seek the help of her cousins, the Brithwoods of the Mythe. But John was at hand, calm, strong and reliable—and to him she instinctively turned. It was he who arranged the funeral; and, by her special request, only he and I and our good landlady accompanied her to the graveside, when the burial took place in the little churchyard close by. I can see now that simple little procession, the daughter first, supported by good Mrs. Tod, then John Halifax and I. So we buried him. Peace be to him! Whatever his life had been, he was her father.

We followed the orphan home. She had walked firmly, and stood by the graveside motionless, her hood drawn over her face. But when we came back to the door of the cottage, she gave a quick, startled glance up at the window of the room that had been her father's. Then we saw Mrs. Tod take her, unresisting, into her motherly arms—and we knew how it

would be. We left them, and went indoors to our own parlour.

We heard no more of Miss March that day—it was natural that she should wish to be alone. But next morning, we received a message of thanks for our “kindness”. She had given way at last, Mrs. Tod said, and kept her chamber, not seriously ill, but in spirit thoroughly broken down. For the next few days, when I went to meet John returning from Norton Bury, I could see that his first glance, as he rode up between the chestnut trees, was at the window of her bedroom. I always told him, without his asking, whatever Mrs. Tod had told me about her state; he would listen in silence, and then speak of something else. He hardly even mentioned Miss March’s name.

On the fourth morning I happened to ask him whether he had told my father what had occurred.

“No.”

I looked surprised.

“Did you wish me to tell him? I will, if you like, Phineas.”

“Oh no. He takes little interest in strangers.”

Soon after, as he lingered about the parlour, John said:

“Probably I may be a little late to-night. After business hours I want a little talk with your father.”

He stood irresolutely by the fire. I knew by his countenance that there was something on his mind. But I did not urge him to tell me more. At the moment he did not seem to wish it. He merely pressed my hand affectionately, and took his leave.

Nor did I question him when he returned that evening—though my curiosity was great—and it was not till we were about to retire for the night that he said to me, with a rather sad smile, “Phineas, you would like to know what it was I wished to speak about to your father.”

“Ay, do tell me.”

“It is hardly worth telling. Only to ask him how he set up in business for himself. He was, I believe, little older than I am now.”

"Just twenty-one."

"And I shall be twenty-one next June."

"And are you thinking of setting up for yourself?"

"A likely matter!" and he laughed rather bitterly. "No, Phineas; you'll not see me setting up a rival tanyard next year. My capital is *nil*."

"Except youth, health, courage, honesty, and a few other such trifles."

"None of which I can coin into money, however. And your father has expressly told me that without money a tanner can do nothing."

"Unless, as in his own case, he is taken into some partnership, where his services are so valuable as to be received instead of capital. True my father earned little at first, scarcely more than you earn now; but he managed to live respectably, and, in course of time, to marry."

I avoided looking at him as I said the last word. He made no answer, but in a little time he came and leaned over my chair.

"Phineas, you are a wise counsellor—'a brother born for adversity'. I have been vexing myself a good deal about my future, but now I will take heart. Perhaps, some day, neither you nor anyone else will be ashamed of me."

"No one could, even now, seeing you as you really are."

"As John Halifax, not as the tanner's 'prentice boy? Oh lad—there the goad sticks! *Here* I can be my free natural self. But at Norton Bury—— However, it is a wrong, wicked feeling, and must be kept down. Let us talk of something else."

"Of Miss March? She has been greatly better all day."

"She? No, not her to-night!" he said hurriedly. "Pah! I could almost fancy the odour of those hides still on my hands. Give me a candle."

He went upstairs, and only re-appeared a few minutes before bedtime.

Next morning was Sunday, and soon after breakfast came

a message from Miss March that she would like to speak to us both. Of course we went.

She was sitting, quite alone—grave and pale, but perfectly composed. She rose, and we shook hands. She invited us to sit down, and we began to talk of common things—not *the* thing. She seemed to have fought through the worst of her trouble, and I rejoiced to see she was in some degree herself again.

She and John conversed a good deal. Her manner to him was easy and natural, as to a friend who possessed her warm gratitude; his was more constrained. Gradually, however, this wore away.

He asked her, I believe, how long she intended staying at Enderley.

"I can hardly tell. My cousin Richard Brithwood, has been left my guardian. This my fa—This was to have been altered, I believe. I wish it had been. Do you know Norton Bury, Mr. Halifax?"

"I live there."

"Indeed!" with some surprise. "Then you are probably acquainted with my cousin and his wife."

"No; but I have seen them."

John gave these answers without lifting his eyes.

"Will you tell me candidly—for I know nothing of her, and it is rather important that I should learn—what sort of a person is Lady Caroline Brithwood?"

This frank question was very hard to be answered; for Norton Bury had said many hard things of our young Squire's wife—a daughter of the Earl of Luxmore. She was known to have belonged to a very fast set before her marriage.—John hesitated, then answered, as he could with truth:

"She is said to be very charitable to the poor, pleasant, and kind-hearted. But, if I may venture to say so, she is not exactly the friend whom I think Miss March would choose, or to whom she would wish to be indebted for anything but courtesy."

"That was not my meaning. I need not be indebted to

anyone. Only, if she were a good woman, Lady Caroline would have been a great comfort and a useful adviser to one who is not yet eighteen, and, I believe, an heiress."

"An heiress!" The colour flashed in a torrent over John's whole face, then left him pale. "I—pardon me—I thought it was otherwise. Allow me to—to express my pleasure."

"It does not add to mine," said she, half sighing. "Jane Cardigan always told me riches brought many cares. Poor Jane! I wish I could go back to her—but that is impossible."

A silence here intervened, which it was necessary someone should break.

"So much good can be done with a large fortune," I said.

"Yes. I know not if mine is very large. But, be it much or little, I will try to use it well."

"I am sure you will."

John said nothing; but his eyes, sad indeed, yet lit with a proud tenderness, rested upon her as she spoke. Soon after he rose to take his leave.

"Do not go yet; I want to ask about Norton Bury. I had no idea you lived there. And Mr. Fletcher too?"

I replied in the affirmative.

"In what part of the town?"

"On the Coltham Road, near the Abbey."

"Ah, those Abbey chimes!—how I used to listen to them, night after night, when the pain kept me awake."

"What pain?" asked John, suddenly, alive to any suffering of hers.

Miss March smiled almost her old smile. "Oh, I had nearly forgotten it, though it was very bad at the time; only I cut my wrist rather badly with a bread-knife in a struggle with my nurse."

"When was that?" eagerly inquired John. For me, I said nothing, I had already guessed it all.

"When was it? Let me see—five, six years ago. But, indeed, 'tis nothing."

"Not exactly 'nothing'. Do tell me!" he persisted earnestly.

"Well, if you must know, it was in one of my naughti-

nesses—I was very naughty as a child. They would not let me have a piece of bread I wanted to give to a poor lad.”

“Who stood opposite—under an alley—in the rain? Was it not so?”

“How could you know? But he looked so hungry; I was so sorry for him.”

“Were you?” in a tone almost inaudible.

“I have often thought of him since, when I chanced to look at this scar.”

“Let me look at it. May I?”

Taking her hand, he gently put back the sleeve, discovering just above the wrist, a deep, discoloured seam. He gazed at it, his features all quivering; then, without a word of adieu or apology, he quitted the room.

I was left alone with Miss March. Her face expressed surprise, not unmixed with embarrassment.

“What does he mean, Mr. Fletcher? Can I have offended him in any way?”

“Indeed, no.”

“Why did he go away?”

But that question, simple in itself, involved so much, that I felt I had no right to answer it. Nor could it be right for me to prevaricate. After a short pause, therefore, I said plainly:

“I know the reason, Miss March. I would tell you, but I think he would sooner do so himself.”

“As he pleases,” returned Miss March, a slight reserve tempering her frank manner; but it soon vanished, and she began talking again in her usual friendly way, asking me many questions about the Brithwoods and Norton Bury. I answered them freely—my only reservation being that I took care not to give any information concerning ourselves.

Soon afterwards, as John did not come back, I took leave of her, and returned to our own parlour. He was not there, and though he had left word with Mrs. Tod, that he had gone out on to the common and would be back in time for our mid-day dinner, he did not appear when the hour came.

I waited, and at last dined alone, myself feeling very wretched. Never before had I known him to break even a trivial promise. But I knew well why he sought solitude; I guessed the conflict that must be taking place in his mind; but, dearly as I loved him, I knew that it was not in my power to help.

It was nearly dusk before he returned, and began to talk with a cheerfulness so unnaturally exaggerated that it was easy to see that it did not correspond with the real state of his mind. I asked him where he had been, and he replied that he had been to Nunnely Hill. "A lovely spot! He must take me there sometime. And soon."

At nine o'clock Mrs. Tod came in with supper. She had always something to say, especially since the late events which had drawn the whole household of Rose Cottage so close together. Now she told us that she had been busy that evening helping Miss March to pack. Had we seen Lady Caroline Brithwood's coach at the door this afternoon? (I had seen the handsome equipage arrive but had thought it better to say nothing to John of Lady Caroline's visit.) And the result of her coming was that Miss March was leaving on the morrow, and going immediately to live with her cousins.

When John heard this, he was helping Mrs. Tod, as usual, to fasten the shutters. He stood, with his hand on the bolt, motionless, till the good woman had gone. Then he sank into a chair, covering his face with both his hands.

There was no longer any attempt to disguise his feelings. A young man's first love—not first fancy, but first love—had come to him in all its intensity. I saw him writhing under it—saw, and could not help him. The next few minutes were very bitter to us both.

Then I said gently, "John."

"Well?"

"I thought things were so. Suppose you talk to me a little—it might do you good."

"Another time. Let me go out—into the air. I am choking."

Snatching his hat, he rushed from me. I did not dare to

follow. But at last I could bear the suspense no longer, and went out also. It was some time before I found him; I had almost despaired of doing so—had, indeed, begun to call his name aloud—when at last I heard his answering shout, and saw his figure loom up out of the darkness.

“Oh, John, John!”

“Phineas, is that you? You should not have come out on this bitter night.”

“I was anxious, John.”

“Oh, Phineas, how thoughtless I am. But I was not myself. I am better now. Come, let us go home.” And putting his arm round me to keep me warm, he brought me back to the house. He even sat down by the fire to talk to me. His face was pale, but I could see that the struggle that had been going on in him was over.

“Phineas,” he said; “I must not keep her in ignorance of my true position any longer. To-morrow, before she goes, I mean to tell her everything. Do you think I am right?”

I told him that I was certain of it.

“Yes,” he continued, “I will tell her. I shall tell her the whole truth—save one thing. I shall not—I must not tell her—that I love her. But everything else she shall hear from my own lips.” He paused, “To think it was *she* who did it, Phineas—that first kindness to a poor friendless boy. I never forgot it—never. It did me more good than I can tell. And that scar on her dear arm; how this morning I would have given all the world to——”

He broke off leaving the one word unsaid, and was again silent. And I—I hardly knew why—sighed. Or was it because I knew that there had now grown up in his heart a feeling far closer than the closest bond of brotherly love.

But John heard my sigh, and with that quick intuitive sympathy that was always so remarkable in him, guessed my thoughts. He turned round. “Phineas,” he said, “you must not think that—because of this—I could ever think less, or feel less, about my brother.”

He spoke earnestly, with a full heart. We clasped hands

warmly and silently. Thus was sealed my last lingering pain—I was henceforth entirely satisfied.

The next morning he was out early as usual, taking his morning walk on the Flat. I went to meet him as he returned, and as we neared the door of Rose Cottage, we saw Miss March herself outside, trying to find one fresh rose among the fast withering clusters. She saw us, acknowledged us, but hurriedly, and not without some momentary signs of agitation.

"The roses are all gone," she said rather sadly.

"There are still a few, higher up. Shall I pick one for you?" I marvelled at the composure with which John spoke.

"Thank you—if you will. I wanted to take some away with me—I am leaving Rose Cottage to-day, Mr. Halifax."

"So I have heard." He did not say "sorry to hear." I wondered did the omission strike her? But no—evidently she still regarded us as mere acquaintances.

But re-entering the house, she asked us if we would come in with her; she had a few things still to say to us. And she again referred gratefully to our "kindness".

We all went once more—for the last time—into the little parlour.

"Yes—I am going away," said she mournfully.

"We hope all good will go with you—always and everywhere."

"Thank you, Mr. Fletcher."

It was strange the grave tone our intercourse now invariably assumed. We might have been three old people, instead of three young ones, in the very dawn of life.

"Circumstances have fixed my plans since I saw you yesterday. I am going to reside for a time with my cousins, the Brithwoods. It seems best for me. Lady Caroline is very kind, and I am very lonely."

She said this not in any complaint, but as if accepting the fact, and making up her mind to endure it. A little more fragmentary conversation passed, chiefly between herself and me—John scarcely uttered a word. He sat by the window,

half shading his face with his hand. The moments narrowed. Would he say now what he had intended to say of his position? There might not be another opportunity.

"This is not a very long good-bye, I trust?" said she to me, with something more than courtesy. "We shall meet again, I hope, at my cousin's house."

Knowing such a meeting to be impossible, I did not know what to reply. John also said nothing. She looked surprised—hurt—nay displeased; then her eye, resting on John, lost its haughtiness, and became humble and sweet.

"Mr. Halifax, I know nothing of my cousin, and I do not know you. But I know you live at Norton Bury. Will you tell me—candidly, as I know you will—whether there is anything in Mr. Brithwood which you think unworthy of your acquaintance?"

"He would think me unworthy of his," was the low, firm answer.

Miss March smiled incredulously. "Because you are not very rich? What can that signify? It is enough for me that my friends are gentlemen."

"Mr. Brithwood and many others, would not allow my claim to that title."

Astonished, she drew back a little. "I do not quite understand you."

"Let me explain. It is right, Miss March, that you should know who and what I am, to whom you are giving the honour of your kindness. Perhaps you ought to have known before; but here at Enderley we seemed to be equals—friends."

"I have indeed felt it so."

"Then you will pardon my not telling you—what you never asked, and I was only too ready to forget—that we are *not* equals—that is, society would not regard us as such—and I doubt if even you yourself would wish us to be friends."

"Why not?"

"Because you are a gentlewoman and I am a tradesman."

The news was evidently a shock to her—it could not but

be, reared as she had been. She sat—eyelashes dropping over her flushed cheeks—perfectly silent. John's voice grew firmer—prouder—no hesitation now.

"My calling is, as you will soon hear at Norton Bury, that of a tanner. I am apprentice to Abel Fletcher—Phineas's father."

"Mr. Fletcher!" she looked up at me—a mingled look of kindness and pain.

"Ah, Phineas is a little less beneath your notice than I am. He is rich—he has been well educated; I have had to educate myself. I came to Norton Bury six years ago—a penniless orphan boy, in rags."

The earnestness of his tone made Miss March lift her eyes; but they fell again.

"Yes, Phineas found me in an alley—starving. We stood in the rain, opposite the Mayor's house. A little girl—you know her, Miss March—came to the door, and threw out to me a bit of bread."

Now indeed she started. "You—was that *you*?"

"It was I." Then, his whole manner changing to softness, he added, "I never forgot that little girl. Many a time, when I was inclined to do wrong, she kept me right—the remembrance of her sweet face and her kindness."

That face was pressed down against the sofa where she sat. I think Miss March was all but weeping. "I am glad to have met her again," John continued—"glad to have been able to do her some small good in return for the infinite good she once did me! I shall bid her farewell now—at once and altogether."

A quick involuntary turn of the hidden face asked him "Why?"

"Because the world says we are not equals, and it would not be for Miss March's honour nor mine did I try to force upon it the truth—which I hope to prove openly one day—that we *are* equals."

Miss March looked up at him—it was hard to say with what expression—of pleasure, or pride, or simple astonish-

ment; perhaps a mingling of all—then her eyelids fell. She silently offered her hand. John took the hand, held it firmly; then suddenly he pressed his lips to the place where the wound had been—a long, close kiss, such as only a lover's kiss could be. A moment afterwards he was gone.

That afternoon Miss March departed, and we remained at Enderley alone.

CHAPTER VIII

It was now January. All the summer days at Enderley were gone, as if they had been a dream. Of her who had been the beautiful centre of that dream we had never heard nor spoken since.

John and I were out walking together towards the Mythe. All Norton Bury seemed abroad; and half Norton Bury exchanged salutations with my companion, till I was amused to notice how large John's acquaintance had grown.

Among the rest there overtook us a little elderly lady, as prim and neat as an old maid, and bright-looking as a happy matron. I saw at once who it was—Mrs. Jessop, our good doctor's new wife, and old love; whom he had lately brought home, to the great amazement of all Norton Bury.

"She seems to like you very much," I said, as, after a cordial greeting (which John returned rather formally), she trotted on.

"They were both very kind to me in London last month, as I think I told you."

"Ay!" It was one of the few things he had told me about that same journey to London, for he had grown a painful habit of silence now.

A little further on, we came once more upon the old lady, watching the skaters. She again spoke to John, and looked at me with her keen, kind blue eyes. At her request, he introduced me. She then inquired if John were stronger than he had been in London.

"Was he ill in London, madam?" I asked.

"No, indeed, Phineas! or only enough to win Dr. and Mrs. Jessop's great kindness."

"Which you have never come to thank us for," she said, with a smile. "You have never once crossed our door-step

since you came home! Does not your conscience sting you for your ingratitude?"

"Indeed, Mrs. Jessop, it was not ingratitude," said he, colouring slightly.

"I knew it; I believe it," she answered, still with much kindness. "Tell me what it was. The plain truth, if you please."

John hesitated. Then explained that he did not feel that their kindness to him in London justified him for intruding himself upon them at Norton Bury. "It might not be agreeable for you and Dr. Jessop to have my acquaintance here. I am a tradesman."

The little old lady's eyes brightened into something more than kindness. "Mr. Halifax, I thank you for the plain truth. Truth is always best. Now for mine. I had heard that you were a tradesman; I found out for myself that you were a gentleman. I do not think the two facts incompatible, nor does my husband. We shall be very happy to see you at our house at all times and under any circumstances."

She offered him her hand. John bowed over it in silence, but it was long since I had seen him look more pleased.

"Well, then, suppose you come this evening, both of you."

We assented and, on her further invitation, John and I and the little old lady walked on together.

"I know this road well, Mr. Halifax," said she. "I once spent a summer here with an old pupil, now grown up. I am going to-day to inquire about her at the Mythe House." I saw John start. "The Brithwoods have been at Bath, but they came back yesterday. Mr. Brithwood is the young lady's guardian."

"Were you—Miss Jane Cardigan!" I exclaimed.

"What, Mr. Fletcher, you know my name! And really, now I think of it, I believe I have heard yours. Not from my husband either. It couldn't possibly be—yes! it certainly was—how strange! Did you ever hear tell of a Miss Ursula March?"

The live crimson rushed over John's face. Mrs. Jessop saw

it. She looked at first astonished, then exceedingly grave.

I replied: "We had the honour of meeting Miss March last summer at Enderley."

"Ah, yes," the old lady continued, somewhat formally; "now I recollect Miss March told me something of the circumstances; of two gentlemen there who were very kind when her father died; a Mr. Fletcher and his friend—was that Mr. Halifax?"

"It was," I answered, for John was speechless.

Mrs. Jessop went on, still addressing herself to me.

"I am sure I ought, on behalf of my dear pupil, to offer you both my warmest thanks. Hers was a very trying position. I am thankful her trouble was softened by finding that *strangers*"—(was it my fancy that detected a slight stress on the word)—"mere strangers could be at once so thoughtful and so kind."

At the gates of the Mythe House she stopped; great iron gates they were, such as the rich used in those times to shut out the poor and plebeian. John, glancing once up at them, hurriedly moved on.

"Stay; you will come and see us to-night, Mr. Halifax? Promise!"

"If you wish it."

"And promise, too, that under all circumstances you will tell me the plain truth, as you did just now? Yes, I see you will. Good-bye." The gate closed upon her, and against us. There was agony in John's face as he glanced up the long drive towards the great house which was now Miss Ursula March's home.

"John," said I, as we turned back; "it is long since you told me anything. It might do you good."

"Nothing can do me good. Nothing but bearing it. My God! What have I not borne? Five whole months to be dying of thirst, and not a drop of water to cool my tongue. God forgive me!—but I sometimes think I would sell my very soul to the devil for one glimpse of her face, one touch of her hand."

I made no answer. What answer could I make to such words as these?

"Phineas," he gasped, "talk to me—about something else—anything. Don't let me think, or I shall go clean mad."

And indeed he looked so. I was terrified. But I knew that it must come out.

"And you have gone on working all this time?"

"I was obliged. Nothing but work kept me in my senses. Besides"—and he laughed hoarsely—"I was safest in the tanyard. The thought of her could not come there."

"But you went away to London?"

"Yes, for a while. I thought I would be a gentleman again—just for a pretence, you know—a dream—a bit of the old dream back again. So I went to London."

"And met the Jessops there?"

"Yes; though I did not know till now that *she* was Jane Cardigan. But I liked her—I liked my life with them. It was like breathing a higher air, the same air that—— Oh, Phineas, it was horrible to come back to my life here—to that cursed tanyard."

I said nothing.

"You see, Phineas, how wicked I am growing. You will have to cut my acquaintance presently. But, oh! it is hard, hard! The barrier which divides me from her, though so impenetrable, is so unreal. If she and I were to meet and stand together, equal to equal, I could make her love me; I feel I could. Oh, how I despise myself! Why cannot I trust my manhood, my honest manhood that I was born with, go straight to her, and tell her I love her; that God meant her for me, and me for her? Phineas, mark my words"—and, wild as his manner was, it had a certain force, and sounded like a prophecy—"if ever Ursula March marries she will be my wife—my wife!"

I could only murmur, "Heaven grant it."

"But we shall never marry, neither of us; we shall go on alone and apart till the next world. Perhaps she will come to

me there, for there *all* are equal.—And now, Phineas, we will never speak of this again; I'll try and be a better brother to you in future. Come along."

He drew my arm in his, and we went home.

Passing the tanyard, John proposed that we should call for my father. My poor father, now daily growing more sour and old, and ever relying more upon John. It was pleasant to see how he brightened up at his coming—how readily, when we turned homeward, he leaned upon his strong arm, now the support of both him and me. But observing how many people greeted John as we passed, he began to warn him sternly that he was making friends too fast.

"Not friends—*only* friendly acquaintances," was the gentle answer: he was well used to turning away Abel Fletcher's wrath. But this was roused beyond control when Dr. Jessop's neat carriage, and neatest of little wives, stopped at the curbstone. She beckoned John, and said:

"I want you and Mr. Fletcher to come to us to-morrow instead of this evening. Lady Caroline Brithwood wishes to see you."

"Me?"

"Yes, you," smiled the old lady; "you, John Halifax, the hero of the people, who quelled the bread riots, and gave evidence thereupon before Mr. Pitt in London. Nay! Why didn't you tell me the wonderful story? Her ladyship is full of it. She will torment me till she sees you—I know her ways. You must come, for my sake."

Waiting no refusal, Mrs. Jessop drove on.

My father had been too far off to *hear* what had passed; but when he learned what had been proposed, he was loud in his demands that John should have nothing at all to do with such people as the Brithwoods. Richard Brithwood, he declared, was a fox-hunting, drinking, dicing fool! His wife, Lady Caroline, was a daughter of Jezebel, brought up in the impious atrocities of France, and the debaucheries of Naples. "Do you not know," he cried, "that she abode there with that vile woman they call Lady Hamilton?"

John started. "Take care, Abel Fletcher," he said, in much agitation. "Any taint upon a woman's fame harms her not alone, but all connected with her. For God's sake, sir, whether it be true or not, do not whisper it in Norton Bury that Lady Caroline is a friend of Lady Hamilton."

"Pshaw! What is either woman to us? Dost thee mean to go, John?"

"I do, Abel Fletcher. Whatever Lady Caroline may be, it is not to her house, but to Dr. Jessop's that I am going. We know that the Jessops are good people."

John, I could see, had seized eagerly upon the hope that he would encounter Ursula March at the Jessops, and this, not the prospect of meeting Lady Caroline, was what had determined him to accept the invitation. But I believed it to be a false hope. Mrs. Jessop, I was sure, had divined his feeling too surely to risk bringing John Halifax and her old pupil together again.

Mrs. Jessop's drawing-room was ruddy with firelight, and glittering with wax-candles, when John and I entered it together on the following evening. A few women were there, in pale-coloured gauzy dresses; a few men, sublime in blue coats, gold buttons, yellow waistcoats, and smiles. This was all I noticed of the scene, which was quite a novel one to me.

The doctor's wife introduced us formally to all her guests, who greeted us with a kind of well-bred formal surprise. But their manner changed somewhat when Mrs. Jessop said, pointedly and aloud, though with a smile playing under the corners of her good little mouth:

"Mr. Halifax, it is kind of you to come; Lady Caroline Brithwood will be delighted. She longs to make your acquaintance."

After that everyone began to talk with extraordinary civility to Mr. Halifax the tanner.

As for John, he soon took his place among them, with that modest self-possession which best becomes youth. Society's

dangerous waters thus became smooth to him, as to a good swimmer, who knows his own strength, trusts it, and struggles not.

"Mr. Brithwood and Lady Caroline will be late," I overheard our hostess say to her husband. "I think I told you that Miss March would——"

But here the door was flung open, and the missing guests announced: Mr. Brithwood and Lady Caroline alone; Miss March had not come with them. John, at their entrance, had turned eagerly towards the door. But when the name he had hoped to hear was not given out, he turned away and I could not see his face. As for myself I could not tell whether I was glad or sorry——

I had seldom seen the squire or Lady Caroline. He was a portly young man, pinched in by tight light-coloured garments. She was a lady, rather past her first youth, but very handsome still, who floated about, leaving a general impression of pseudo-Greek draperies, gleaming arms and shoulders, sparkling jewellery, and equally sparkling smiles. These smiles seemed to fall just as brightly upon the family physician, whom she was thus honouring with a visit, as if the worthy Dr. Jessop were the noblest in the land. He, poor man, was all bows and scrapes and pretty speeches. But Mrs. Jessop seemed to wear her honours as hostess to the earl's daughter very calmly indeed. She performed the ordinary ceremonies and then went over to talk with Mr. Brithwood. In their conversation I sought in vain the name of Ursula.

So it ended—the sickening expectation which I had read in the lad's face all day. He would not see her—perhaps it was best. Yet my heart bled when I looked at him.

Upon Lady Caroline's entrance John had drawn back a little, and I with him. So it came to pass that, while everybody gathered round the Brithwoods, John and I stood alone, and half concealed by the window.

But very soon I heard Lady Caroline's loud whisper:

"Mrs. Jessop, my good friend, one moment. Where is your *jeune héros, l'homme du peuple*? I do not see him. Does he

wear clouted shoes and woollen stockings? Has he a broad face and turned up nose, like your *paysans anglais*?"

"Judge for yourself, my lady—Mr. Halifax, let me present you to Lady Caroline Brithwood."

If Lady Luxmore's fair daughter ever looked confounded in her life, she did at this moment.

"*Lui? Mon Dieu! Lui!*" And her shrug of amazement was stopped, her half-extended hand drawn back. No, it was quite impossible to patronize John Halifax.

He bowed gravely, she made a gracious curtsy; they met on equal terms, a lady and a gentleman. But soon her lively manner returned; they talked a long time, she drawing him out, as a well-bred young woman can draw out a young man of sense. He looked pleased; he conversed well. As for her, it was evident that she liked John Halifax.

Supper-time drew near—a glorious hour at Norton Bury parties. People began to look anxiously towards the door.

"Before we adjourn," I suddenly heard Lady Caroline say to John, "I must do what it will be difficult to accomplish after supper," and for the first time a sharp, sarcastic tone jarred her smooth voice. "I must introduce you to my husband.—Mr. Brithwood!"

"Madam." He lounged up to her. They were a diverse pair; she in her well-preserved beauty, and Gallic artificial grace—he, in his coarse, bloated youth, coarser and worse than the sensualism of middle-age.

"Mr. Brithwood, let me introduce you to a new friend of mine."

The squire bowed awkwardly, proving the truth of what Norton Bury often whispered, that Richard Brithwood was more at home with grooms than gentlemen.

"He belongs to your town—you must have heard of him, perhaps met him."

"I have more than once had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Brithwood, but he has doubtless forgotten it."

"By jove! I have. What might your name be, sir?"

"John Halifax."

"What, Halifax, the tanner?"

"The same."

"Phew!" He began a low whistle, and turned on his heel.

John changed colour a little. Lady Caroline laughed—a thoughtless amused laugh, with a pleasant murmur of "Bête!"—"Anglais."—Nevertheless she whispered to her husband: "Mon ami—you forget; I have introduced you to a gentleman."

"Gentleman indeed! Pooh! Rubbish! Lady Caroline—I'm busy talking."

"And so are we,—most pleasantly. I only called you as a matter of form, to ratify my invitation. Mr. Halifax will, I hope, dine with us next Sunday."

"The devil he will! Madam, you must be crazy. This young man is a tradesman—a tanner. Not fit for my society."

"Precisely. I invite him for my own." Lady Caroline turned again.

But the whispers and responses were alike unheeded by their object. For, at the doorway, entering with Mrs. Jessop, was a tall girl in deep mourning—none other than Ursula March herself.

John was near the door. He started, but quickly recovered his composure. Their eyes met. She bowed—he returned the bow. He was very pale. For Miss March, her face and neck were all in a glow. Neither spoke, nor offered more than this passing acknowledgment; then she moved on.

She came and sat down beside me, accidentally, I believe; but when she saw me she held out her hand. We exchanged a word or two. She had only just arrived from Bath, she told me. Hence her late appearance. Her manner was unaltered. She said this meeting was to her "unexpected", but "she was very glad to see me".

John kept his position, a little aloof from the Brithwoods, who were holding a slight altercation—though more of looks than of words. But John heeded them not. His whole mind, I know, was concentrated upon that part of the room where Miss March was sitting. I was sure, though he never looked

directly towards us, that he overheard every syllable Miss March said to me.

The squire called across the room, in a patronizing tone: "My good fellow—that is, ahem! I say, young Halifax."

"Were you addressing me, Mr. Brithwood?"

"I was. I want a quiet word or two—between ourselves."

"Certainly."

They stood face to face. The one uncomfortable, the other his natural self—a little graver perhaps, as if he felt what was coming, and prepared to meet it, knowing in whose presence he had to prove himself—what Richard Brithwood with all his broad acres could never be—a gentleman.

"On my soul, it's awkward—I'll call at the tanyard and explain."

"I had rather you would explain here."

"Well, then, though it's a confounded unpleasant thing to say—and I really wish I had not been brought into such a position—you'll not heed my wife's nonsense."

"I do not understand you."

"Come, it's no use running to cover in that way. I mean no offence. But really, in spite of my lady's likings, I can't well invite you to my table."

"Nor could I humiliate myself by accepting such an invitation."

He said the words distinctly, so that the whole circle might have heard, and was turning away, when Mr. Brithwood fired up—as an angry man does in a losing game.

"Humiliate yourself! What do you mean, sir? Wouldn't you be only too glad to crawl into the houses of your betters? You—a tradesman. You used to drive Fletcher's cart of skins, did you not?"

The young blood rose fiercely to John's cheek, but he answered firmly enough, "I did."

"And, by jove, yes! are you not the very lad—the tanner's lad—that once pulled us ashore from the eger—Cousin March and me?"

I heard a quick exclamation beside me, and saw that

Ursula March was listening intently. Her eyes were fixed on John, waiting for his answer. It came.

"Your memory is correct; I was that lad."

"Thank'ee for it too. Lord! What a jolly life I should have missed! You got no reward though. You threw away the guinea I offered you; come, I'll make it twenty guineas to-morrow."

The insult was too much. "Sir, you forget that whatever we may have been, to-night we meet as equals."

"Equals!"

"As guests in the same house—most certainly, for the time being, equals."

All eyes were now fixed on the two men. Richard Brithwood stared, literally dumb with fury. He came close to John, his fists clenched. "Now mark me, you—you vagabond."

Ursula March rose and crossed the room. She caught his arm, her eyes gleaming.

"Cousin, in my presence this gentleman shall be treated with proper civility. He was kind to my father."

"Curse your father!"

John's right hand burst free; he clutched the savage by the shoulder.

"Be silent! You had better."

Brithwood shook off the grasp, turned and struck him; that last fatal insult which, offered from man to man, could, in those days, only be wiped out by blood.

John staggered. For a moment he seemed as if he would have sprung on his adversary and felled him to the ground, but—he did not.

Someone whispered, "He won't fight. He is a Quaker."

"No!" he said, and stood erect; though he was ghastly pale; "but I am a Christian. I shall not return blow for blow."

Such a doctrine, though familiar to the ear, was foreign to the practice of Christian Norton Bury. No one spoke; one or two sheered off from him with contemptuous smiles.

Then Ursula March stretched out her friendly hand. John took it, and was calm in a moment.

There arose a murmur of "Mr. Brithwood is going."

"Let him go!" Miss March cried, anger still glowing in her eyes.

"Not so—it is not right. I will speak to him. May I?" John went up to Mr. Brithwood. "Sir, there is no need for you to leave this house—I am leaving it. You and I shall not meet again if I can help it."

His proud courtesy, his absolute dignity and calmness, completely overwhelmed his blustering adversary, who gazed open-mouthed, while John made his adieux. The women gathered round him. Even Lady Caroline was heard to declare that she had not believed there was a man in the universe who could bear so charmingly such a "degradation".

At the words Miss March fired up. "Madam," she said, in her impetuous young voice, "no insult offered to a man can ever degrade him; the only real degradation is when he degrades himself."

John, passing out of the doorway, caught her words. No victor ever wore a look more joyful, more proud. A minute later I, with Dr. and Mrs. Jessop, followed him. But now the joy and pride had both faded.

"Mrs. Jessop, you see I am right," he murmured. "I ought not to have come here. It is a hard world for such as I. I shall never conquer it—never."

"Yes—you will." And Ursula stood by him, with crimsoned cheek; her eyes no longer flashing, but fearless still. "Yes, you will." And she took his hand again, and they stood there close together, gazing unhesitatingly into each other's eyes.

Mrs. Jessop did not interfere. She had herself known what true love was, if, as gossips said, she had kept constant to our worthy doctor for thirty years. But still she was a prudent woman; not unused to the world. She put her arm round the young girl.

"I also think you need not dread the world, Mr. Halifax, if you always act as you did to-night." She laid her disengaged hand gently on John's arm. "You must go now."

"I am going. But she—what will she do?"

"Never mind me. Jane will take care of me," said Ursula, winding her arms round her old governess, and leaning her cheek on Mrs. Jessop's shoulder.

We had never seen Miss March show fondness, that is—caressing fondness, to anyone before. It revealed her in a new light, betraying the infinite depths of softness and love that were in her nature.

John watched her for a minute; a long, wild, greedy minute. Then he whispered hoarsely to me, "I must go."

We made a hasty adieu, and went out together into the cold, bleak night.

CHAPTER IX

FOR weeks after that we went on in our usual way, Ursula March living within a stone's throw of us. She had left her cousins and come to reside with Dr. Jessop and his wife.

It was a hard trial for John. Neither of us were invited again by Mrs. Jessop. We could not blame her; she held a precious charge, and Norton Bury was a horrible place for gossip. But I saw that John's health was beginning to suffer under the strain, and I began to fear a complete breakdown. And then one evening he came and told me that he had heard she was to leave Norton Bury.

"Thank God!" I muttered.

John turned fiercely upon me, but only for a moment. "Perhaps I ought to say, 'thank God'. This could not have lasted long, or it would have made me—what I pray His mercy to save me from. Oh, lad, if I could but die! To see her only when she passes me in the street; and then but to bow and pass on! But even that, torment though it is, is better than never to see her again at all." And he bent over the window, crushing his forehead on his hands.

"John," I groaned, "I would that you had never seen her."

A few hours later he was lying on my bed, struck down by the first real sickness he had ever known, since his coming to Norton Bury. It was apparently a low aguish fever, which had been much about the town since the famine of last year. At first he would have no one but Jael to attend him—seemed terrified at the mere mention of Dr. Jessop.

But after a few days we called in a physician—a stranger from Coltham—who pronounced it to be this Norton Bury fever, caught through living (as he had still persisted in doing) in his old attic, in that unhealthy alley where was Sally Watkins's house. It must have been coming on for some

time, the doctor said; but it had no doubt reached its crisis. He would be better soon.

But he did not get better. Days slid into weeks, and still he lay there, never complaining. Yet when I spoke of recovery, he "turned his face to the wall"—weary of living. And one day the physician confessed to me that he believed him to be a dying man! Oh God of mercy! if I were to be left in this world without my brother!

How could I save him? There seemed but one way, and I sprang to it. In half an hour, without saying a word to a human being, I was on my way to Ursula March.

She sat knitting, alone, in the summer-parlour; but her eyes had a soft dreaminess. My entrance had evidently startled her, and driven away some sweet, shy thoughts.

But she met me cordially—said she was glad to see me—that she had not seen either of us lately; and the knitting-pins began to move quietly again. Those dainty fingers—that soft tremulous smile—at that moment I could have hated her.

"No wonder you did not see us, Miss March; John has been very ill, is ill now—almost dying."

I hurled the words at her, sharp as javelins, and watched to see them strike. They struck—they wounded; I could see her shiver.

"Ill!—and no one ever told me."

"You? How could it affect you? To me, now"—and my savage words, for they were savage, broke down in a burst of misery—"nothing in this world to me is worth a straw in comparison with John. If he dies——"

I let loose the flood of my misery. I dashed it over her, that she might see it—feel it. For was she not the cause of it? (Forgive me! I was cruel to you, Ursula; and you were so good—so kind.)

She rose, came to me, and took my hand, her voice trembling. "Be comforted. He is young, and God is very merciful." She could say no more, but sat down nervously twisting and untwisting her fingers. There was in her looks

a wild sorrow, a longing to escape from notice. Rising at last, she made an attempt to quit the room.

"I will call Mrs. Jessop: she may be of use——"

"She cannot. Stay!"

"Further advice, perhaps? Dr. Jessop—you must want help——"

"None save that which will never come. His bodily sickness is conquered—it is his mind. Oh, Miss March!"—and I looked up at her like a wretch begging for life—"do *you* not know of what my brother is dying? He is dying of love. There is no hope, unless—— But I have no right to say more."

There was no need. A deep, soft red, sunrise colour, dawned all over her face. She looked at me once—just once—with a mute but keen inquiry.

"It is the truth, Miss March—ay, ever since last year. You will respect it?"

She bent her head in acquiescence; but she uttered not a syllable. The silence almost drove me wild. "What! not one word? not one ordinary message from a friend to a friend?——"

Still silence.

"Better so!" I cried, made desperate at last. "Better, if it must be, that he should die and go to the God who made him—ay, made him, as you shall yet see, too noble a man to die for any woman's love."

I left her—left her where she sat, and went my way.

Of the hours that followed the less I say the better. My mind was a tumult of pain, in which right and wrong were strangely confused. I could not decide—I can scarcely decide now—whether what I had done *ought* to have been done. I only know that I did it under an impulse that seemed to me like the guidance of Providence. To Providence then the result must be left. And so, after a season, I calmed myself enough to dare to enter the sick-chamber, where no one ever entered but Jael and me.

The old woman met me at the door.

"Come in gently, Phineas; I do think there is a change."

A change!—that awful word! I staggered rather than walked to John's bedside.

Ay, there was a change, but not *that* one, thank God! John was sitting up in bed. New life shone in his eyes, in his whole aspect. Life and—no, not hope, but something far better.

"Phineas, how tired you look; it is time you were in bed."

The old way of speaking—the old, natural voice, as I had not heard it for weeks. I flung myself by the bedside, weeping unashamedly.

"You must not grieve over me any more, Phineas; to-morrow, please God! I mean to be quite well again.—Phineas, I have had a dream—a dream so curious that I have not yet lost the impression of it." Then very softly: "Do you know, Phineas, in my dream I saw her, sitting beside me, just where you sit now."

"Miss March?"

"Yes, she sat there talking. She told me she knew I loved her—loved her so much that I was dying for her; that it was very wrong; that a true man should try and live nobly for the woman he loves—it is only a coward who dies for her."

I listened, wonderstruck—for these were the very words that Ursula March might have uttered. I asked him if there was any more of the dream.

"Nothing clear. I thought we were on the Flat at Enderley, and I was following her; whether I reached her or not I cannot tell. But this I know, Phineas, I will do as she bade me; I will rise and walk."

And so he did. He slept soundly that night. Next morning, I found him up and dressed. Looking like a spectre, indeed, but with health, courage, and hope in his eyes. At dinner-time, with Jael's help, he crawled downstairs.

Stern man as my father was, there were tears in his eyes as he welcomed him.

"Why, thee art picking up, lad. Thee'll be a man again in no time."

"I hope so. And a better man than ever I was before."

We never had a happier meal in our house than that dinner. In the afternoon my father stayed at home—a rare thing for him to do; nay more, he went and smoked his peaceful pipe in the garden. John lay on the sofa, and I read to him. After an hour or so Jael burst into the room.

"John Halifax, there be a woman asking for thee."

No, John—no need for that start—as if there were but one woman in the world. No, it was only Mrs. Jessop. At sight of him, standing up tall, gaunt and pale, the good lady's eyes brimmed over.

"You have been very ill, my poor boy! Forgive me—but I am an old woman, you know. Lie down again." With gentle force she compelled him, and sat down by his side. She chided him softly for not having let her know of his illness; declared that her husband would come and see him to-morrow. She made no mention of Ursula March and my heart felt very sore against the girl. But, at last, just as she rose to take her leave, she pulled a little note from the depths of her pocket, saying, "My dear child sends you this."

His fingers closed over it convulsively. "I—she is very kind." The words died away; the hand which grasped the unopened letter trembled.

"Yes, hers is a grateful nature," observed Mrs. Jessop. "Read your little note, Mr. Halifax, that I may take your answer to her. She told me what she had said to you."

"Answer?" He opened it and read; it was a short, simple note.

"My dear Friend—I did not know till yesterday that you had been ill. I have not forgotten how kind you were to my poor father. I should like to come and see you, if you will allow me—Yours sincerely, Ursula March."

"Well, what shall I say to my child?"

"Say,"—he half rose, struggling to speak—"ask her to come."

He turned his head towards the window, to hide the tears that came into his eyes. Mrs. Jessop went away.

John lay dreamily on the sofa, his eyes closed. My father came in from the garden, and settled to his afternoon doze. It was almost dark when at length Ursula came.

She stood at the parlour door—a vision of youth and candid innocence, which blushed not, nor had need to blush. John rose to meet her. They did not speak, but only clasped hands. At that moment I knew beyond doubt how it would all end.

My father woke—rubbed his eyes—became aware of a lady's presence—rubbed them again, and sat staring. John led Ursula to the old man's chair.

"Mr. Fletcher, this is Miss March, a friend of mine who, hearing I was ill, out of her great kindness——"

The voice faltered. Miss March added in a low tone, with eyes downcast:

"I am an orphan, and he was kind to my dear father."

Abel Fletcher's gaze lingered long on that young face. So often I had heard him say that women were the curse of a man's life. How would he receive her? I found myself trembling. But Ursula's dignity and sweet simplicity conquered. At last he spoke.

"If thee be a friend of John's, welcome to my house. Sit down."

CHAPTER X

IN the late autumn of that year John married Ursula March. He was twenty-one and she eighteen. It was very young—too young perhaps some folks might say; and yet sometimes I think a double blessing falls on unions like this, where the hearts are young and fresh, easily moulded one to the other, and rich in the riches of youth.

They started life poor (at least by the standards to which Ursula March had been accustomed), in an old dwelling-house, situated in the middle of the town, which my father had bought with the flour mill. Richard Brithwood would have stopped the marriage had it lain in his power to do so. But Mr. March's will had left his daughter perfect freedom in her choice of a husband; only the control of her fortune was left in her guardian's hands. He took his revenge for "this insult to the honour of his family" and "his cousin's defiance" by refusing to let this control pass out of his hands. John, I believe, was almost relieved; it was as if a burden had been removed from his mind. As for Ursula herself, she had no fear of facing the future, if only she could face it with John Halifax.

I had much ill-health that winter, and could go out little. But they came constantly to me, John and Ursula, especially the latter. During this illness, when I learned to watch longingly for her kind face, and listen to her cheerful voice, talking pleasantly and sisterly beside my chair, she taught me to give up the "Mrs. Halifax", and to call her "Ursula". It was only by slow degrees that I did so; for she was not one of those gentle creatures whom, married or single, one calls instinctively by their Christian names. John's wife was a true woman, but she was a woman who commanded respect.

In the long *midsummer* days, when our house was quiet and rather dreary, I got into the habit of creeping over to

John's house, and sitting for hours under the apple trees in his garden; a garden which, with the help of their young gardener, Jem Watkins, had been quickly transformed from a wilderness into a place of beauty. Or else, when it was hot noon, I used to lie in their cool parlour, and listen to Ursula moving about the house, teaching her maid Jenny (Jem's wife) or learning *from* her—for the young gentleman had much to learn about housekeeping, and was not ashamed of it either. Often she would sit chatting to me, having on her lap a coarse brown pan, shelling peas, slicing beans, picking gooseberries; her white fingers looking whiter than ever in contrast with their unaccustomed work. Or else, in the summer evenings, she would be at the window, sewing, but so placed that she could see down the street where John was coming. Far, far off she always saw him; and at the sight her whole face would change and brighten. Then she ran to open the door, and I could hear his low "my darling", and a long, long pause in the hall.

They were very, very happy in those early days—those quiet days of poverty, when they visited nobody, and nobody visited them; when their whole world was bounded by the dark old house and the garden, with its four high walls.

One July night, I remember, John and I were walking up and down the garden paths by starlight. It was very hot weather, inclining one to stay out of doors half the night. Ursula had been with us a good while, but now he had sent her in to rest, and we two remained outside alone.

"How strange all seems! how unreal!" said John in a low voice, when we had walked the length of the garden in silence.

"What seems?"

"What?—oh, everything." He hesitated a moment. "No, not everything—but something which to me seems now to fill and be mixed up with everything I do, or think, or feel. Something you do not know—but to-night Ursula said I might tell you." He stopped and touched a pear tree. "It seems but yesterday, Phineas, that this tree was in blossom;

now it is in full fruit; and when it is bare, we shall, with God's blessing, have a little child. By Christmas-time, I shall be a *father*."

I wrung his hand in silence. He sat down on the garden bench, and did not speak for a long time.

"I wonder," he said at last, "if, when I was born, *my* father was as young as I am; whether he felt as I do now. You cannot think what an awful joy it is to be looking forward to a child; a little soul of God's giving to be made fit for eternity. How shall we do it! We that are both so ignorant, so young—she will be only just nineteen, when, please God, her baby is born."

"God will help you both, and make you wise."

"We trust he will; and then we need not be afraid."

In the winter, when the first snow lay on the ground, the little one came.

It was a girl—I think they had wished for a son; but they forgot all about that when the tiny maiden appeared. She was a pretty baby—at least all the womenkind said so, from Mrs. Jessop down to Jael, who left our poor house to its own devices, and trod stately in Mrs. Halifax's, exhibiting to all beholders the mass of white draperies with the infinitesimal human morsel inside them—which she vehemently declared was the image of its father.

The little maiden grew like the snowdrops. Winter might have dropped her out of her very lap, so exceedingly pale and fair she was. She was named Muriel, after John's own mother. Ursula herself, out of the fullness of her happy heart, chose the second name—Joy. Therefore the baby was called Muriel Joy Halifax.

That name—beautiful, sacred, and never-to-be-forgotten among us—I write it now with tears!

In December 1802 she was born—our Muriel. And on February 9th—alas! I have need to remember the date!—she formally received her name. We all dined at John's house—Dr. and Mrs. Jessop, my father and I. It was the first time my

father had taken a meal outside his own house for twenty years, and well I remember the pleasure with which his unexpected arrival was received by the proud young parents.

Afterwards when the child had been taken upstairs to sleep, we drew merrily round the fire, or watched outside the window the thickly falling snow. At length my father rose to leave.

"Do not go yet, Abel Fletcher," said John; "Ursula wants to show you our little lady."

We knew my father did not like babies; he had never seen, or expressed a wish to see John's daughter; but he sat down again; and a minute later Ursula returned holding the child, who had just awakened, in her arms. Abel Fletcher looked at it and her—closed his eyes against both, and looked no more. Ursula seemed pained a moment, but soon forgot it in the general admiration of her treasure.

"She might well come in a snowstorm," said Mrs. Jessop, taking the child. "She is just like snow, so soft and white."

"And as soundless—she hardly ever cries. She just lies in this way half the day over, cooing quietly with her eyes shut. There, she has caught your dress fast. Now, was there ever a two months' old baby so quick at noticing things? And she does it all with her fingers—she touches everything.—Ah, take care, Doctor," the mother added reproachfully at a loud slam of the door, which made the baby tremble all over.

"I never knew a child so susceptible of sounds," said John, as he began talking to it and soothing it. "I think even now she knows the difference between her mother's voice and mine; and any sudden noise always startles her in this way."

"She must have astonishingly quick hearing," said the doctor, slightly annoyed. Ursula wisely began to talk of something else—showed Muriel's eyelashes, very long for such a baby—and discarded on the colour of her eyes, that never-ending theme of mothers.

"I think they are like her father's; but we do not have many opportunities of judging—she is such a lazy young damsel, she hardly ever opens them. Ah! she has opened them now.

There do you see? Come to the window, my beauty, and show Dr. Jessop your bonny brown eyes."

They *were* bonny eyes! lovely in shape and colour. But now I noticed for the first time a look of quiet blankness in them—a vacant look. It caught Dr. Jessop's notice too. I saw his air of vexed dignity change to a certain anxiety.

"Well, whose are they like," continued Ursula gaily, "her father's or mine?"

"I—I can't exactly tell. I could judge better by candlelight."

"We'll have candles."

"No—no! Better put it off to another day. I'll call in to-morrow and look at her eyes."

His manner was hesitating and troubled. John noticed it. "Love," he said, "give her to me. Go and get lights, will you?"

When she was gone, John took his baby to the window, gazed long and intently into her little face, then at Dr. Jessop. "Do you think—no, it is not possible!—that there can be anything the matter with her eyes?"

Ursula, coming in, heard the last words.

"What was that you said about my baby's eyes?"

No one answered her. All were gathered in a group at the window, the child being held on her father's lap, while Dr. Jessop was trying to open the small white lids. At last the baby uttered a little cry of pain; the mother darted forward, and clasped it almost savagely to her breast.

"I will not have my baby hurt. There is nothing wrong with her sweet eyes. Go away; you shall not touch her, John."

"Love."

She melted at that low, fond word; leaning against his shoulder, trying to control her tears.

"It shocked me so—the bare thought of such a thing. Oh, John, don't let her be looked at again."

"Only once more, my darling. It is best. Then we shall be quite satisfied. Phineas, give me the candle."

Lulled by her father's voice, the child once more opened

her eyes wide. Dr. Jessop passed the candle before them many times, once so close that it almost touched her face; but the full, quiet eyes never blenched or closed.

As gently as he could, Dr. Jessop pronounced the verdict. The child was blind.

"John! John! Oh John!" The mother's agonized cry was pitiful to hear. "Oh, John, it is so hard! Our pretty one—our own little child!"

He did not speak, but only held her to him—close and fast—and whispered softly that they must learn to bear it—it was God's will.

"And it is more of an affliction to you than it will be for her, poor pet," said Mrs. Jessop, as she wiped her eyes. "She will not miss what she never knew. Look how happily she lies and smiles."

But the mother could not take that consolation yet. She walked to and fro, and stood rocking her baby, mute indeed, but the tears falling in showers. Gradually her anguish wept itself away, or was smothered down, lest it should disturb the little creature at her breast.

Some one came behind her, and placed her in the arm-chair gently. It was my father. He sat down by her, taking her hand.

"Grieve not, Ursula. I had a little brother who was blind. He was the happiest creature I ever knew."

My father sighed, and we all marvelled to see the wonderful tenderness that had suddenly come into him. "Give me thy child for a minute." Ursula laid it across his knees; he put his hand solemnly on the baby's breast. "God bless this little one! Ay, and she shall be blessed."

These words, spoken with as full assurance as the prophetic benediction of the departing patriarchs of old, struck us all. We looked at Muriel, as if this blessing were already upon her.

My father rose, slowly, for all movement was painful to him in these days. The last year had aged him terribly. "Now, children, I must go home."

"You will come again soon?" begged Ursula, tenderly clasping his hand.

"Perhaps. We never know. Be a good wife to thy husband, my girl. And John, never be harsh to her. God bless thee all."

We all prepared to go, and they did not detain us; it was indeed best that the young parents should be left alone. I walked home with my father, and as we went he spoke to me of things new and strange to me—things that had happened long ago; sayings and doings of mine in my own childhood, which I had not the least idea he had either known or remembered. When we got indoors I asked him if I should come and sit with him till his bedtime.

"No—no, thee looks tired, and I have a business letter to write. Better go to thy bed as usual."

I bade him good night, and was going when he called me back.

"How old art thee, Phineas—twenty-four or five."

"Twenty-five, Father."

"Eh, so much?" He looked at me kindly, even tenderly. "It may well be, after all, that thee mayst live to be as old a man as thy father. Good night. God be with thee, my son."

When Jael went that night, as she always did at ten o'clock, to tell my father it was his bedtime, she found him sitting very still in his chair. And *his* eyes too were wide open and sightless. My father was dead.

CHAPTER XI

IT was the year 1812. I had lived for ten years as a brother in my adopted brother's house, for Jael had survived my father only by a year—and our old home had been sold. I had long resisted John's request that I should join his household, for it was my opinion that married people ought to have no one who was not of their own family, however close and dear, living permanently with them. But John and Ursula had declared that I *was* part of their family, and that my going to them would add to their happiness. So at last I consented; and none of us, I hope and believe, ever had any reason to regret it—certainly not I.

John had several children now. The dark old house and the square town garden were alive with their voices from morning till night. First, and loudest always, was Guy—born the year after Muriel. After him came two more sons, Edwin and Walter. Guy was very like his mother, and her darling. But best of them all I loved the eldest child, blind little Muriel. And to her also her father gave a love and devotion far beyond that which he gave to his other children, devoted to them all though he was. A sweeter, more tranquil child I never knew. She was more than Joy—she was an embodied Peace. And her influence was extraordinary.

Those ten years had been years of struggle. The tanyard had ceased to be profitable, and had been closed down; business was now entirely confined to the flour-mill. And Richard Brithwood still kept a vengeful, relentless hold on Ursula's fortune. But whenever, as often happened in those days, John came home jaded and worn, sickened to the soul by the hard battle he was fighting, Muriel would come and climb on his lap, and nestle close to him, and he would be comforted. And if, at times, Ursula's voice took too sharp a tone (for the endless cares of her household and family were

often a sore trial to one who had been nurtured as she had been), at sight of Muriel it softened at once. The boys, as boys will, would quarrel sometimes among themselves, but their quarrels ceased the moment their beloved sister appeared among them.

The fact of her blindness had ceased to wound her parents. ("She shall be blessed," my father had said, and so she was.) They would have looked annoyed now if anyone had pitied them for having a blind child.

The spring of 1812 was a season long remembered in our family. Scarlet fever went through the house—safely, though leaving much care behind. But the days of poverty were over—or so it seemed—and John had begun to prosper. A country holiday was decided upon, to restore the children's health. Our destination was Longfield, a farmhouse a mile or two from Enderley. We were far from rich—but the holiday could be afforded without too much contrivance—ay, and a horse for John to ride daily to and from his work at Norton Bury.

"Oh, how I wish we could always live in the country," exclaimed Ursula, as we sat talking together of the coming "change of air".

"Do you, my darling?" said the father. "Well, perhaps we may manage it some time."

"When our ship comes in—namely that money which Richard Brithwood will not pay—and John Halifax will not go to law to make him—Nay, father dear, I am not going to quarrel with you about that: I would not quarrel with any one of your whims." She spoke with a fond pride, as she always did, even when arguing against the too quixotic carrying out of the said whims. "Perhaps, as the reward of forbearance, the money will come some day when we least expect it; then John shall have his heart's desire, and take over the cloth mills at Enderley."

John smiled half sadly. Every man has a hobby—this was his, and had been for fifteen years. Not merely the making of a fortune, as he firmly believed it could be made, but the

position of useful power, the wide range of influence, the infinite opportunities of doing good, which control of the mills would give him.

"No, love; I shall never be 'patriarch of the valley', as Phineas used to call it. The yew hedge is too thick for me, eh, Phineas?"

"No!" cried Ursula. We had told her this little incident of our boyhood—"You have got half through it already. Everybody in Norton Bury respects you. I am sure, Phineas, you might have heard a pin fall at the meeting last night when he spoke against the hanging of the Luddites. And such a shout arose as he ended.—Oh, how proud I was."

"Of the shout, love?"

"Nonsense!—but of the cause of it. Proud to see my husband defending the poor and oppressed—proud of seeing him honoured and looked up to, more and more every year, till——"

"Till it may come at last to the prophecy in your verse," said I—"Her husband is known in the gates; he sitteth among the elders of the land'."

Mrs. Halifax laughed at me for reminding her of this—but allowed that she would not dislike its being fulfilled.

"And it will be too. He is already 'known in the gates'—far and near. Think how many of our neighbours come to John to settle their differences, instead of going to law. See how he is consulted, and his opinion followed, by rich folk as well as poor. I am sure John is as popular, and has as much influence, as many a member of Parliament."

John smiled with an amused twitch about his mouth, but he said nothing. He rarely did say anything about himself, even in his own household.

"Listen! There's Muriel!"

Often thus the child slipped away, and suddenly we heard all over the house the sweet sounds of "Muriel's voice", as someone had called the old harpsichord. When almost a baby she would feel her way to it, and find out first harmonies, then tunes, with that quickness and delicacy of ear so peculiar to the blind.

"How well she plays!" continued John, with a sigh. "I wish I could buy her one of those new instruments they call 'pianofortes'. I was looking into the mechanism of one the other day."

"She would like an organ better. You should have seen her face in the Abbey church this morning."

"Hark! she has stopped playing. Guy, run and bring your sister here," said the father, ever yearning after his darling.

Guy came back with a wonderful story of two gentlemen in the parlour—one of whom had patted his head—"Such a grand gentleman, a great deal grander than father."

This was true as regarded the bright nankeens, the blue coat with gold buttons, and the showiest of cambric kerchiefs swathing him up to the very chin. To this "grand" personage John bowed formally, as the two visitors were shown in; but his wife flushed up in surprised recognition.

"It is so long since I have had the pleasure of seeing Miss March, that I conclude Mrs. Halifax has forgotten me."

"No, Lord Luxmore" (Yes, it was the Earl of Luxmore, Lady Caroline Brithwood's father)—"Allow me to introduce my husband." And, as she said this, Ursula raised her head proudly. She had good reason to do so—for John, despite his plainer clothes, looked full as much of a gentleman as the Earl—and of the two, the finer, nobler man.

And of the two, the visitor was less at his ease, for the welcome of Mr. and Mrs. Halifax though courteous, was decidedly cold. The Earl of Luxmore was a man of ill-repute. But his *manners* were polished, and he lost no time in breaking the ice.

"Mr. Halifax, I have long wished to know you.—Mrs. Halifax, my daughter encouraged me to pay you this impromptu visit."

Here ensued polite inquiries after Lady Caroline; we learned that she had just returned to the Mythe House, after a long absence abroad, and was at present entertaining her father and brother.

"Pardon—I was forgetting my son—Lord Ravenel."

The youth thus presented merely bowed. 'He was about eighteen or so, tall and spare, with thin features and large soft eyes. He soon retreated to the garden door, where he stood, watching the boys play, and shyly attempting to make friends with Muriel.

"I believe Ravenel has seen you years ago, Mrs. Halifax. His sister made a great pet of him as a child. He has just completed his education—at the College of St. Omer, was it not, William?"

"The *Catholic* college of St. Omer," repeated the boy.

"Tut—what matters!" said the father sharply. "Mr. Halifax, do not imagine we are a Catholic family still. I hope the next Earl of Luxmore will be able to take his seat in the House of Lords, whether or no we get Emancipation. (Catholics at this time were excluded from all political privileges.) "By-the-bye, you uphold the Bill?"

John assented; expressing his conviction, then unhappily a rare one, that all men of blameless life ought to be protected, and allowed to serve the state, whatever their religious opinions.

"Mr. Halifax, I entirely agree with you. A wise man esteems all faiths alike worthless."

"Excuse me, my lord, that was the very last thing I meant to say. I hold every man's faith sacred. It is a matter solely between himself and his Maker."

"Exactly. What facility of expression your husband has, Mrs. Halifax. He must be—indeed, I have heard he is—a first-rate public speaker."

The wife smiled; but John hurriedly said that he had no such pretensions. He merely tried to represent plain truth to the people, in a way they could understand.

"Ay, that is it. My dear sir, the people have no more brains than the handle of my cane; they must be led or driven. We"—a lordly "we"—"are their proper shepherds. But we want a middle class—at least an occasional voice from it, a——"

"A shepherd's dog to give tongue," said John dryly. "In

short a public orator. In the House of Commons, or out of it?"

"Both." And the Earl tapped his boot with his cane, smiling. "Yes; I see you understand me. But, before we commence that somewhat delicate subject, there was another matter on which I desired my agent, Mr. Brown, to obtain your valuable opinion."

"You mean, when, yesterday, he offered me, by your lordship's express desire, the lease, lately fallen in, of your cloth-mill at Enderley?"

Now John had not told us that!—why, his manner too plainly showed.

"And all will be arranged, I trust?" Lord Luxmore went on: "Brown says you have long wished to take the mill; I shall be most happy to have you as tenant."

"My lord, as I told your agent, it is impossible. Let us say no more about it."

Lord Luxmore had the reputation of being a keen-witted, diplomatic personage; undoubtedly he had, or could assume, that winning charm of manner which his daughter had inherited from him. Both qualities it pleased him to exercise now. He rose, addressing with kindly frankness the husband and wife.

"If I may ask—being a most sincere well-wisher of yours—and a sort of connection of Mrs. Halifax's too—why is it impossible?"

"I have no wish to disguise the reason; it is because I have no capital."

Lord Luxmore looked surprised. "Surely—excuse me—but surely—your wife's fortune."

Ursula rose in her impetuous way. "His wife's fortune!—John let me say it! I will, I must!—Of his wife's fortune, Lord Luxmore, he has never received one farthing. Richard Brithwood keeps it back, and my husband would work night and day for me and our children rather than go to law."

"Oh, on principle, I suppose? I have heard of such

opinions." This with the slightest perceptible sneer. "And you agree with him?"

"I do, heartily. I would rather we lived poor all our days than he should wear his life out, perhaps even soil his conscience, by squabbling with a bad man about money matters."

It was good to see the loving, trusting look that husband and wife interchanged as she spoke; they were so blessedly, so safely *one*. Then John said in his quiet way:

"Love, perhaps another subject than our own affairs would be more interesting to Lord Luxmore."

"Not at all—not at all." The Earl was evidently puzzled and annoyed. "Such extraordinary conduct," he muttered: "so very—ahem—unwise. If the matter were known—brought up by those newspapers—I must really have a little conversation with Brithwood."

There was a pause; and John started to speak of other matters. But very soon the Earl reverted to his first topic. "Mr. Halifax," he said, "there is shortly to be a general election; and on that election will depend Catholic Emancipation. You would be of great use to our cause in parliament. Will you—I like plain speaking—will you enter it?"

Enter Parliament! John Halifax in Parliament! His wife and I were both astounded by the suddenness of the possibility, which, however, John seemed to receive as no novel idea.

"I assure you there is nothing more easy," Lord Luxmore continued; "I can bring you in at once for a borough near here—my family borough."

"Which you wish to be held by some convenient person till Lord Ravenel comes of age? So Mr. Brown told me yesterday."

Lord Luxmore slightly frowned. Such transactions were common then, but were generally glossed over, as if a certain discredit attached to them. The young lord, turning round at the sound of his name, seemed to feel it. Not so his father.

"Brown is—(may I offer you a pinch of snuff, Mr. Halifax?—What, not my friend the Prince Regent's own mixture?)

—Brown is a worthy fellow, but too hasty in his conclusions. As it happens, my son is yet undecided between the priesthood and politics—Mrs. Halifax, may I not enlist you on my side?—Would you not like to see your husband member for the old and honourable borough of Kingswell?”

“Kingswell!” It was a tumble-down village, where John held and managed for me the sole remnant of the landed property my poor father had left me. “Kingswell! Why, there are not a dozen houses in the whole place.”

“The fewer the better, my dear madam. The election would cost me scarcely any—trouble; and the country would be vastly the gainer by your husband’s talents and probity. Of course, he will give up the—I forget what is his business now—and live independent. It will be an honour for me to be associated with him. Mr. Halifax, will you accept my borough?”

“Not on any consideration your lordship could offer me.”

Lord Luxmore scarcely credited his ears. “My dear sir! Most extraordinary. May I ask your reasons?”

“I have several; one will suffice. Though I wish to gain influence—power perhaps; still the last thing I should desire would be political influence.”

“You might possibly escape that unwelcome attention,” returned the Earl. “Half the House of Commons is made up of harmless dummies, who vote as we bid them.”

“A character, my lord, for which I am decidedly unsuited. Until political conscience ceases to be a thing of traffic, until people are honestly allowed to choose their own honest representatives, I must decline being among that number. Shall we dismiss the subject?”

“With pleasure, sir.” The Earl as he spoke looked somewhat offended. But he quickly suppressed his feelings—perhaps he saw that in these days it would be unwise to offend a young man of character, who spoke so genuinely for the long-suffering people. Further courtesies were exchanged; and at length both our visitors withdrew.

Ursula came over to where John sat, and put her arm proudly about his shoulder. I left them alone together, and crept upstairs to correct the children's lesson books—for, thank God! I was not useless in this house. It was in my hands that their education lay.

Our removal to Longfield—that arcadian spot—was to take place on the following Monday. The next few days were filled with the happy anticipations of the children, which we old ones fully shared. Ursula was very busy with her needle, making ready the necessary clothes.

On Friday evening John came in from his work, looking more tired than usual; and he sank heavily into his chair. Ursula, to revive his spirits, began to talk of the joys that were so soon to be ours. But John gently interrupted her. "My darling," he said, "would you be very disappointed if we did not go to Longfield after all?"

"Not go to Longfield!" The involuntary exclamation revealed how deep her longing had been.

"Because I am afraid—it is hard, I know—but I am afraid we cannot manage it. Are you very sorry?"

"Yes," she said, frankly and truthfully. "Not so much for myself, but—the children."

"Ay, the poor children!" And John's expression showed how bitterly he too felt it for their sakes.

At Ursula's bidding, he explained what had happened. A firm which had owed him a large sum of money had defaulted—had gone altogether out of business. He must retrench for a long time before he could recover.

"Is that all?" she said at last, very gently. "Then never mind; I do not. We will find some other treats for the children. We have all so many pleasures, ay, all of us. Husband, it is not so very hard to give this one up."

"My darling," he said, in a low whisper, "I could give up anything in the world but them and thee." And he kissed the hand which she held out to him.

But John's troubled looks did not pass away, and he sat long in silence. Muriel, his beloved Muriel—always a delicate

child—had suffered a greater set back in health than any of the rest had done from their recent illnesses. I knew how much he had counted on this change to restore her.

“What’s that?”

We all started as a sudden peal of the bell rang through the house. And a moment later Jenny—still our maid—entered with a letter, which a lackey of Lord Luxmore’s had brought from the Mythe House. John read it; his face brightened; and then, without a word, he handed it to Ursula. I heard her cry of joy. Truly the dealings of heaven to us were wonderful!

The letter, which was now read aloud, was as follows:

“Mr. John Halifax.

“Sir,—Your wife, Ursula Halifax, having some time since attained the age fixed by her late father as her majority, I will, within a month after date, pay over to your order all moneys, principal and interest, accruing to her, and hitherto left in my hands as trustee, according to the will of the late Henry March, Esquire—I am, sir, yours etc.—Richard Brithwood.”

CHAPTER XII

NOT many weeks afterwards we went to *live* at Longfield, which henceforth became the family home for many years.

Longfield! Happy Longfield! little nest of love, and joy and peace—where the children grew up. How shall I describe it—the familiar spot—so familiar that it seems to need no description at all?

It was but a small place when we first came there. It led out of the high road by a field gate—the White Gate—from which a narrow path wound down to a stream, thence up a green slope to the house—a mere farmhouse, nothing more. It had one parlour, three decent bedrooms, a kitchen, and outhouses. We built extempore chambers out of the barn and cheese room. In one of these the boys, Guy and Edwin, later slept, and birds and bats used sometimes to fly in, to the great delight of the youthful inmates.

Another infinite pleasure to the young people was that, during the first year, the farmhouse kitchen was made our dining-room. There, through the open door, Edwin's pigeons, Muriel's two doves, and sometimes a stately hen, walked in and out at pleasure.

But I am looking forward too far. Let me return to those first weeks after our move from Norton Bury.

Parliament had been dissolved, and the new election was approaching. The evening before it was to take place, John, on his return from Norton Bury, called me aside. The Earl of Luxmore's nominee for Kingswell was, he had discovered, a certain Mr. Gerald Vermilye, a young man of aristocratic connections, and heir to a baronetage; but of evil life and repute. He had further learned that Mr. Vermilye was heavily in debt, and was seeking election only so that he might escape prison—for, as a Member of Parliament, he

would be safe from arrest. John declared to me his intention of being present at Kingswood when the election took place; and though he did not tell me what he intended to do, I saw that he had formed some plan which he wished to put in effect.

John had now taken over the cloth-mills at Enderley—the timely coming of Ursula's fortune had enabled him after all to lease them from Lord Luxmore—and most of his working hours were at present spent there. But he had still retained the flour-mill at Norton Bury—he always disliked giving up old associations—and it was to Norton Bury he rode off early on the following morning. At dinner-time, however, he came home, saying that he was going out again immediately—to Kingswell.

Ursula looked uneasy. A few minutes after she followed me under the walnut tree, where I was sitting with Muriel, and asked me if I would go with John.

"He thinks it his duty to be at the election," said she, "He will meet Mr. Brithwood and Lord Luxmore; and though there is not the slightest need—my husband can do all that he has to do alone—still, for my own satisfaction, I would like his brother to be with him. (They invariably called me "brother" now).

Of course I went to Kingswell, riding John's brown mare, he himself walking by my side. It was not often we were thus alone together in these days, and I enjoyed it much. Often I caught the old smile—not one of his boys, not even handsome Guy, had their father's smile.

He was telling me about the Enderley Mills, and all his plans there, in which he seemed very happy. At last his long life of duty was merging into the life he loved. He looked as proud and pleased as a boy in talking of the new inventions he meant to apply to cloth-weaving; and how he and his wife had agreed together to live for some years to come at little Longfield, strictly within their settled income, that all the remainder of their capital might go to the improvement of the Mills and mill people.

"I shall be master of nearly a hundred men and women. Think what good we may do! Shé has half a dozen plans on foot already—bless her heart."

"Was the dinner in the barn next Monday her plan too?"

"Partly. I thought we would begin a sort of yearly festival for the old tanyard people, for those about the flour-mill, and for your tenants at Kingswell. Ah, Phineas, wasn't I right about these Kingswell folk?"

These were about a dozen poor families whom, when our mortgage fell in (on the property my father had left to me), he had turned out of Sally Watkins's miserable alley to these old Kingswell houses, where they had at least fresh country air, and space enough to live wholesomely and decently, instead of herding together like pigs in a sty.

"You ought to be proud of your tenants, Phineas. I assure you they form quite a contrast to their neighbours, who are Lord Luxmore's."

"And his voters likewise, I suppose—the free and independent burgesses who are to send Mr. Vermilye to Parliament."

"If they can," said John, biting his lip with that resolute, half-combative air which I now saw in him at times, when his feelings were roused by things repugnant to his principles. No one was more conscious than he of the great mass of social corruption which kept gathering and gathering, but which he still had to endure, not having risen high enough to oppose.

"Do you know, Phineas, I might have sold your houses at Kingswell last week for a double price? They are valuable this year, since your five tenants are the only voters in Kingswell who are not likewise tenants of Lord Luxmore? Don't you see how the matter stands?"

It was not difficult, for that sort of game was played all over England before the Reform Bill opened up the election system in all its rottenness and enormity.

"Of course I knew you would not sell your houses; and I shall use every possible influence I have to prevent your

tenants from selling their votes. Whatever may be the result, this is the sort of thing against which every honest Englishman ought to set his face, and prevent if he can."

"Can you?"

"I do not feel sure, but I mean to try. You understand now why I am going to Kingswell?"

I did, only too well, for I foresaw that whatever he was about to do, it must necessarily run counter to Lord Luxmore—and he had only just signed the lease of the Enderley Mills. Still, if there was right to be done, he ought to do it, and I knew his wife would say so.

We came to the foot of Kingswell Hill, and saw before us the little hamlet, with its grey old houses, and its small, ancient church, guarded by enormous old elm-trees. A carriage overtook us here; in it were two gentlemen, the elder of whom bowed in a friendly manner to John. He returned it, and the carriage passed on.

"This is well. I shall have one honest gentleman to deal with to-day," said John.

"Who is he?"

"Sir Ralph Oldtower, from whom I rent Longfield. A true English gentleman; I respect him."

"Yet, John, Norton Bury calls you a democrat."

"So I am, for I belong to the people. But I nevertheless uphold a true aristocracy—the best men of the country—men of principle and integrity."

At length we reached the Luxmore Arms, and went into the large parlour, where the election was going on. A very simple thing that election! Sir Ralph Oldtower, the county sheriff, sat at a table, with his son, a grave-looking young man who had been with him in the carriage. Near them were Mr. Brithwood of The Mythe, and the Earl of Luxmore.

The room was pretty well filled with farmers' labourers and the like. We entered, making little noise; but John was taller than most present; the sheriff saw him at once, and bowed courteously. So did Mr. Herbert Oldtower, so did the Earl of Luxmore. Richard Brithwood, now a coarse,

bloated middle-aged man, alone turned his back and looked another way.

“Less noise there!” growled Mr. Brithwood. “Silence you fellows at the door! Now, Sir Ralph, let’s get the business over, and be back for dinner.”

Sir Ralph turned his stately grey head to the light, put on his gold spectacles, and began to read the writ of election. As he finished the small audience set up a feeble cheer. The sheriff acknowledged it, and leaning over the table, spoke with rather frosty civility to Lord Luxmore. Then he rose, and briefly stated that Richard Brithwood of the Mythe would nominate a candidate.

He did so, and at the mention of Gerald Vermilye (who was not himself present in the room) one Norton Bury man broke into a hoarse laugh, which was quenched by his immediate ejection from the meeting. Then Mr. Thomas Brown, steward of Lord Luxmore, seconded the nomination. After a few more words between the sheriff, his son, and Lord Luxmore (the result of which seemed rather unsatisfactory than otherwise), Sir Ralph Oldtower rose again.

“Gentlemen and electors, there being no other candidate proposed, nothing is left me but to declare Gerald Vermilye Esquire——”

John Halifax made his way to the table. “Sir Ralph, pardon my interruption. May I speak a few words?”

Mr. Brithwood started up with an agry oath.

“My good sir,” said the baronet with a look of reprehension.

“By ——, Sir Ralph, you shall not hear that low fellow.”

“Excuse me, I must and shall, if he has a right to be heard. Mr. Halifax, are you a freeman of Kingswell?”

“I am.”

This fact surprised none more than myself. Brithwood furiously exclaimed that it was a falsehood. “The fellow does not belong to Kingswell. He was picked up in the Norton Bury streets—a beggar, a thief, for all I know.”

“You do know very well, Mr. Brithwood. Sir Ralph, I

was never a beggar or a thief. I began life as a working lad—Mr. Fletcher, the tanner, took me into his employ.”

“So I have always understood,” said Sir Ralph courteously. “And next to the man who is fortunate enough to boast a noble origin, I respect a man who is not ashamed of a humble one. On what grounds do you claim to be a freeman of this borough, Mr. Halifax?”

“You will find in the charter, Sir Ralph, a clause seldom put in force, that the daughter of a freeman can confer the freedom on her husband. My wife’s late father, Mr. Henry March, was a burgess of Kingswell. I claimed my right, and registered this year. Ask your clerk if I have not spoken correctly.”

The old white-haired clerk allowed the fact. Lord Luxmore looked considerably surprised, and politely incredulous still. His son-in-law broke out into loud abuse of this “knavery”.

“I will pass over that ugly word, Mr. Brithwood,” said John calmly. “I am merely stating——”

“We are quite satisfied,” interrupted Lord Luxmore blandly. “My dear sir, may I request so useful a vote, and so powerful an interest as yours, for our friend, Mr. Vermilye?”

“My lord, I should be sorry for you to misunderstand me for a moment. It is not my intention, except at the last extremity, to vote at all. If I do, it will certainly not be for Mr. Brithwood’s nominee. Sir Ralph, I doubt if, under some circumstances, which I am about to state, Mr. Vermilye can keep his seat, even if elected.”

A murmur arose from the crowd of mechanics and labourers, who had hitherto hung sheepishly back; but, like all English crowds, they were quite ready to “follow the leader”, especially one they knew.

“Hear him! Hear the master!” was distinguished on all sides. Mr. Brithwood looked too enraged for words; but Lord Luxmore, taking snuff with a sarcastic smile said:

“*Honores mutant mores!* I thought, Mr. Halifax, you eschewed politics?”

"Mere politics I do; but not honesty, justice, morality. A few facts have reached my knowledge, though not possibly Lord Luxmore's, which make me feel that Mr. Vermilye's election would be an insult to all three. Therefore I oppose it."

A loud murmur arose. "Silence, you scoundrels!" shouted Mr. Brithwood, with another oath, which again extorted the old baronet's grave rebuke.

"It seems, Sir Ralph, that democracy is rife in your neighbourhood. I was not aware that the *people* chose the member of Parliament."

"They do not, Lord Luxmore," returned the sheriff, somewhat haughtily. "But we always hear the people. Mr. Halifax, be brief. What have you to allege against Mr. Vermilye?"

"First his qualification. He has not three hundred—nor one hundred a year. Warrants are out against him; and only as an M.P. can he be safe from arrest. Add to this, an offence as common as daylight, yet which the law dare not wink at when made patent—that he has bribed, with small or great sums, everyone of the fifteen electors of Kingswell, and I think I have said enough to convince every honest Englishman that Mr. Gerald Vermilye is not fit to represent them in Parliament."

Here a loud cheer broke from the crowd which had collected, thick as bees, at the door and under the open windows. They, the unvoting (and consequently the unbribable) portion of the community, began to hiss indignantly at the fifteen unlucky voters. The sheriff listened uneasily at a sound, very uncommon at elections, of the populace expressing an opinion contrary to that of the lord of the soil.

"Really, Mr. Brithwood, you must have been as ignorant as I was of the character of your nominee, or you would have chosen someone else. Herbert"—he turned to his son, who, until the late dissolution had sat for some years as member for Norton Bury—"Herbert, are you acquainted with any of these facts? Are these accusations true?"

Mr. Herbert Oldtower looked uncomfortable. "I am afraid so," he answered gravely.

"Gentlemen, you have heard Mr. Oldtower, whom you all know.—Mr. Brithwood, I regret extremely that this discovery was not made before. What do you purpose doing?"

"By the Lord that made me, nothing! The borough is Lord Luxmore's—I could nominate Satan himself if I chose. My man shall stand."

"I think," said Lord Luxmore, with meaning, "it would be better for all parties that Mr. Vermilye should stand."

"My lord," said Sir Ralph, firmly and with dignity, "you forget that however desirous I am to satisfy the family to which this borough belongs, it is impossible for me to see with satisfaction—even though I cannot prevent—the election of any person so unfit to serve his Majesty. If indeed, there were another candidate, so that the popular feeling might decide this very difficult matter——"

"Sir Ralph," said John Halifax determinedly, "this brings me to the purpose for which I spoke. Being a landowner, and likewise a freeman of this borough, I claim the right of nominating a second candidate."

"I am bound to say that, though very uncommon, this proceeding is not illegal."

"Not illegal?" almost screamed Richard Brithwood.

"No, certainly not illegal. Mr. Halifax, I await your nomination."

"He is one, Sir Ralph, whose political opinions may differ from my own; but he is also one whom I, and I believe all my neighbours, will be heartily glad to see once more in Parliament. I beg to nominate Mr. Herbert Oldtower."

A decided sensation at the upper half of the room. At the lower a unanimous cheer; for among our county families there were few so warmly respected as the Oldtowers.

Sir Ralph rose, much perplexed. "I trust no one present will suppose I had any idea of Mr. Halifax's intention. Nor, I understand, had Mr. Oldtower. My son must speak for himself."

Mr. Oldtower, with his accustomed gravity, declared that he had no hesitation in accepting the honour offered to him.

"That being the case," said his father, though evidently annoyed, "I have only to fulfil my duty as officer of the Crown."

Amidst some confusion a show of hands was called for; and then arose a cry of "Go to the poll!"

"Go to the poll?" shouted Mr. Brithwood. "This is a family borough. There has not been a poll here these fifty years. Sir Ralph, your son's mad!"

"Sir, insanity is not in the family of the Oldtowers. My position here is simply as sheriff of the county. If a poll be called for——"

"Excuse me, Sir Ralph, it would hardly be worth while. May I offer you——"

It was—only his snuff box. But the earl's polite and meaning smile filled up the remainder of the sentence. Sir Ralph Oldtower drew himself up haughtily, and the fire of youth flashed from his grand old eyes.

"Lord Luxmore seems not to understand the duties and principles of us country gentlemen," he said coldly. "Gentlemen, the poll will be held this afternoon, according to the suggestion of my neighbour here."

"Sir Ralph Oldtower has convenient neighbours," remarked Lord Luxmore.

"Of my neighbour, Mr. Halifax," repeated the old baronet, louder and more emphatically—"a gentleman for whom, ever since I have known him, I have entertained the highest respect."

It was the first public recognition of the position which for some time had been tacitly given to John Halifax, in his own part of the county and coming from this upright and honourable old man, holder of a baronetage centuries old, it made John's cheek glow with honest gratification and pardonable pride.

The poll was to be held in the church—a recognised usage in country boroughs, but which from its rarity struck

great awe into the Kingswell folk. Here, at the appointed time, the fifteen voters assembled, altogether bewildered by their sudden importance. A contested election had not been known within the memory of the oldest inhabitant, and the whole parish was agog to see the novel sight.

The churchwarden was placed in the clerk's desk to receive the votes. Not far off, the sheriff sat in his family pew, bare-headed—and, by his serious and reverent manner imposing due decorum, which was carefully observed by all except Lord Luxmore and Mr. Brithwood. These two, apparently sure of their cause, had recovered their spirits, and talked and laughed loudly on the other side of the church.

"My lord, gentlemen, and my friends all," said Sir Ralph, rising gravely; "let me hope that everyone will respect the sanctity of this place."

"With pleasure, sir—certainly!" exclaimed Lord Luxmore, taking another pinch of snuff.

The poll began in perfect silence. One after the other three farmers went up and voted for Mr. Vermilye. There was snuff under their noses—and probably something heavier than snuff in their pockets. Lord Luxmore's agent had not been wasting his time since the poll had been called for.

Then up came a big, grey-headed fellow—none other than Jacob Baines—he who had once been employed in my father's tanyard. He had taken part, it will be remembered, in the bread riot many years before, when John's brave and generous behaviour had swung him from opposition into loyal support. Then he had been a man in the full flower of his strength. Now he was old, and nearing the end of his days.

As he came forward, he pulled his forelock to Sir Ralph rather shyly.

"Your honour, might I say a word to 'ee?"

"Certainly, my good fellow," replied the baronet kindly; "but be quick."

"Sir, I be a poor man. I lives in one o' my lord's houses. I hanna paid no rent for a year. My lord's steward he zays to

me, he zays, 'Jacob, vote for Vermilye, and I'll forgive 'ee the rent, and here be three guineas to start again wi'. Three he paid to me, and four to Matthew Hales (he be Mr. Halifax's tenant, your honour). An' I zed to Matthew Hales, I zed, us be poor men, and his lordship's a lord so it's no harm, I reckon. But, sir, we has changed our minds; and please, would 'ee give back the money to them as owns it."

"Still, my honest friends——"

"Thank'ee, Sir Ralph, that's it; we be honest, we couldn't look the master in the face else. Twelve years ago, come Michaelmas, he kept some on us from starving—maybe worse. We bean't going to turn rascals now." And he counted out of his pocket a handful of guineas. Poor fellow! to him they were food, clothing, life. "Now, sir," he concluded, "I'll vote—and it won't be for Vermilye."

A smothered murmur of applause greeted old Jacob, as he marched back down the aisle, to where, on the stone steps of the porch, was seated a rural jury, who were discussing, not over favourably, the merits of Lord Luxmore's candidate.

"He owes a power o' money in Norton Bury—he do."—"Why don't he show his face at the 'lection, like a decent gen'lman?"—"Feared o' bailiffs: he's the biggest swindler in all England."

"Curse him!" muttered an old woman. "She was a bonny lass—my Sally. Curse him!"

All this while Lord Luxmore had sat unperturbed in the communion chair, apparently confident that as things always had been, so they would continue to be. It was evidently a great surprise when, the poll being closed, the result was declared as six votes for Mr. Vermilye, *nine* for his opponent. Mr. Herbert Oldtower was therefore the member for Kingswell.

The earl received the result with incredulous silence; but Mr. Brithwood never spared language.

"It's a cheat—an infamous conspiracy! I will unseat him—by God! I will!"

"You may find it difficult," said John Halifax, counting out

the guineas deposited by Jacob Baines, and laying them in a heap before Mr. Brown, the steward.

The earl rose. "Come, Brithwood." To John he gave a satirical bow. "Mr. Halifax—your servant."

"One word, my lord. Those workmen of mine, who are your tenants—I am aware what results usually follow when tenants are in arrears with their landlords.—If, without taking any harsher measures, your agent will be so kind as to apply to *me* for the rent——"

"Sir, my agent will use his own discretion."

"Then I rely on your lordship's kindness—your sense of honour."

"Honour is spoken of only between equals," said the earl haughtily, "but on one thing Mr. Halifax may always rely—my excellent memory."

With a smile, and another bow, as perfect as if he were victoriously quitting the field, the noble lord departed.

Knowing the power of Lord Luxmore, I could not help feeling uneasy. But at this moment Sir Ralph Oldtower came up and gave Mr. Halifax a hearty invitation to come one day to the manor house. Then seeing him hesitate, he added that "Lady Oldtower would shortly have the honour of calling on Mrs. Halifax."

John bowed. "But I ought to tell you, Sir Ralph, that my wife and I are very simple people—that we make no acquaintances, and only desire friends."

"It is fortunate that Lady Oldtower and myself share the same peculiarity." And shaking hands with a stately cordiality, the old man took his leave.

CHAPTER XIII

NEVER was any man more devoted to his family than John Halifax; but, of his children, I repeat, his blind daughter was his darling, his best-beloved. Whenever he came home after his long day's work his first question was always, "Where's Muriel?" and how her face would light up when she heard his footsteps or his voice; and how happily would she sit on his lap and nestle against him.

Muriel's face was very bright on the Monday morning after the election—because her father was going to be at home all day. It was the annual holiday he had planned for his workpeople. There were great cooking preparations—everything that could make merry the heart of man—tea, to comfort the heart of the hard-working women—and lots of bright pennies and silver groats to rejoice the very soul of youth.

Mrs. Halifax, Jem Watkins, and his Jenny, were as busy as bees all morning. John did his best to help, but finally the mother pleaded how hard it was that the children should miss their holiday walk with him, so we were all dismissed from the scene of action, to spend a long, quiet two hours under the great oak on One-tree Hill. The little ones played till they were tired; then John took out the newspaper and read about the battle of Ciudad Rodrigo, and Lord Wellington's entry into Madrid.

"I wish the fighting were over, and peace were come," said Muriel. "There has been a war as long as I can remember. What would peace be like, I wonder?"

"A glorious time, my child—rejoicings everywhere, fathers and brothers coming home, work thriving, poor men's food made cheap, and all things prospering."

"I should like to live to see it. Shall I be a woman then, Father?"

He started. Somehow she seemed so unlike an ordinary child. The boys' future was often merrily planned out; but none of us ever seemed to think of Muriel as a woman.

"Is Muriel anxious to be grown up? Is she not satisfied with being my little daughter always?"

"Always."

Her father drew her to him, and kissed her soft, shut, blind eyes. Then sighing, he rose and proposed that we should all go home.

The first part of the festivities at Longfield was very merry. The men and their families came about noon. Soon after they all sat down to dinner, a feast which took place on tables laid in the open-air. In the afternoon all rambled about as they liked, many under the ciceroneship of Master Guy and Master Edwin, who were very popular and grand indeed. Then the mother, with Walter clinging shy-eyed to her gown, went among the poorer mothers there, talked to one, comforted another, counselled a third, and invariably listened to all. There was nothing of patronizing benevolence about her; her active kindness touched all the women's hearts.

It was already evening, when, having each of us distributed our quota, great or small, to the entertainment, we came and sat down under the walnut tree. The red sun went down behind, throwing a last glint on the upland field, from which the voices and laughter of our visitors came down to us, as they played "thread-the-needle".

"I think they have had a happy day, John," said Ursula. "They will work all the better to-morrow."

"I am sure of it, my dearest."

"So am I," said Guy, whose own enjoyment had been great. He had been acting the young master all day, condescendingly stating his will and expressing his opinion on every subject, greatly petted and looked up to by all, to the no small amusement of us elders.

Muriel, who was reclining on her father's knee, said suddenly, "Father, I hear the click of the gate. There's somebody coming."

John sat up and looked down to the white gate. "'Tis some poor boy—who can he be?"

The lad approached, looking scared and miserable. "What do you want, my boy?"

"I wants Jacob Baines."

"You'll find him with the rest, up there in the field—by the hayrick, with his pipe and ale."

The lad was off like a shot. "He's from Kingswell, I think," said Ursula. "Can anything be the matter, John?"

"I will go and see—No, boys, don't come with me. I will be back presently."

But Ursula seemed anxious. She rose and went after him. I followed her.

Close to the hayrick a group of men were talking angrily. The gossiping mothers were just joining them. Further off the younger folk were still at their game.

"What's amiss?" said Mr. Halifax, as he came into their midst,—and both curses and sobbings were silenced. All began a confused tale of wrongs. But somehow or other we extracted the news brought by the ragged Billy, who on this day had been left in charge of the five dwellings rented to John's men by the Earl of Luxmore. Taking advantage of the tenants' absence, his lordship's steward had carried out a distraint for rent; every stick of furniture had been carried off; two or three aged and sick folk had been left lying on the bare floor—and the poor families would have nothing to go home to but their four walls. This, then, was the beginning of the nobleman's revenge.

Again, at the repetition of the story, the women wept and the men swore.

"Be quiet! Try to keep calm!" said Mr. Halifax. But I saw that his blood was boiling within him. "Jem—saddle the mare—quick—I shall ride over to Kingswell, and thence to the sheriff's."

"God bless'ee sir," sobbed Jacob Baines's widowed daughter-in-law, who had left (as I overheard her telling Mrs. Halifax) a sick child at home to-day.

"Who be they that has done this, master?" cried Jacob savagely, taking up a knobbled stick.

"Put that bludgeon down, Jacob."

The man hesitated—met his master's determined eye—and obeyed him, meek as a lamb.

"But what is us to do, sir?"

"Nothing. Stay here till I return—you shall come to no harm. You will trust me, my men?"

They gathered round him—those big, fierce-looking fellows, in whom was enough brute force to attack or resist anything—yet he made them listen to reason. He explained the injustice that had been done to them—injustice that had overstepped the law, and could only be met by keeping absolutely within the law.

"It is partly my fault, because I did not pay the rents to-day—I will do so at once. I will get your goods back by to-night, if I can. If not, you hale fellows can rough it, and we'll take the women and children in till the morning—can we not, love?"

"Oh, readily," said the mother. "Don't cry, my good women. Mary Baines, give me your baby. Cheer up, the master will get all right."

John smiled at her in fond thanks. As he mounted his horse, she gave him the whip whispering: "Take care of yourself, mind. Come back as soon as you can."

It was a strange three hours we passed during his absence. The misty night fell, and round about the house crept wailing the loud September wind. We brought the women into the kitchen—the men lit a fire in the farmyard, and sat sullenly round it. Ursula was constantly engaged trying to reason them all into patience.

"Where's Muriel?" she said to me suddenly. We both realized, with some anxiety, that we had not seen her for more than an hour. She was not in the house; and we found her at last standing under the walnut-tree—standing alone in the blustering night.

"I wanted to listen for Father. When will he come?"

"Soon, I hope," said her mother with a sigh. "You must not stay out in the cold and dark, my child."

"I am not cold, and I know no dark," said Muriel softly.

And thus it was with her always. In her spirit, as in her outward life, she knew no dark. I believe she was, if ever human being was, purely and entirely happy. Thank God it was so, beloved Muriel!

We brought her back into the house, but she persisted in waiting in her usual place on the door-sill. It was she who first heard the White Gate, and told us that he was coming.

Ursula ran down to the stream to meet him. But when they came up the path, it was not alone—John was helping a lame old woman, and Ursula carried in her arms a sickly child, on whom, when they entered the kitchen, Mary Baines threw herself in a passion of weeping.

"What have they been doing to 'ee, Tommy?—'ee wasn't like this when I left 'ee. Oh, they've been killing my lad, they have."

"Hush!" said Mrs. Halifax. "We'll get him well again, please God. Listen to what the master is saying."

He was telling the men, who gathered round the kitchen door, the results of his journey. It had been fruitless. He had found all things at Kingswell as stated. Then he had ridden to the sheriff's; but Sir Ralph Oldtower was away, and would not return till the next day.

"My friends," said the master, "for a few hours you must make up your minds to bear it. Be patient; we'll lodge you all somehow. To-morrow I will pay your rent and get your goods back—and you shall begin the world again as my tenants, not Lord Luxmore's."

"Hurrah!" shouted the men, easily satisfied as people who have spent their days living from hand to mouth usually are. The men were settled in the barn; the women in some convenient outhouses. Only Mary Baines and her sick child had not been disposed of.

"What can we do with them?" said John to Ursula.

"I see but one course, John. We must take the lad in; his mother says hunger is the chief thing that ails him. She fancies he has had the measles; but our children have had it already, so there is no fear. Come upstairs, Mary Baines."

But I had observed that, at the mention of measles, John had started, as well he might; for, (as he now confided to me), he had learned that evening that there was small-pox at Kingswell. Jem Watkins was sent to Norton Bury for Dr. Jessop, who confirmed his fear that this was the disease with which the child had been stricken.

Ursula, when the news was communicated to her by John, after the doctor's departure, grew as white as death; long shivers came over her from head to foot. The little boys, frightened, crept up to her; she clasped them all together in her arms, turning her head with a wild savage look; as if some one was stealing behind to take them away from her.

Muriel, perceiving the silence, felt her way across the room, and touching her mother's face, said anxiously, "Has anybody been naughty?"

"No, my darling; no."

"Then never mind. Father says nothing will harm us, except being naughty. Did you not, Father?"

John snatched his little daughter up into his arms, and called her for the hundredth time the name my poor old father had named her—the "blessed" child.

We all grew calmer; the mother wept a little, and it did her good; John and I comforted the boys and Muriel, telling them that in truth nothing was the matter, only they must not go near the lad, for fear of catching his sickness.

"They shall quit the house this minute—this very minute," said the mother sternly, but with a sort of wildness too.

Her husband made no immediate answer; but as she rose to leave the room, he detained her. "Ursula, do you not know that the child is all but dying?"

"Let him die! The wicked woman! She knew it, and she let me bring him among my own poor children!"

"I would she had never come. But what is done, is done. Love, think—if *you* were turned out of doors this bleak, rainy night—with a dying child."

"Hush, hush!" She sank down with a sob.

"My darling," whispered John, as he made her lean against him, "this trouble came on us when we were doing right. We must do right still and not be afraid. Our children have been vaccinated. The chances are that they will not take the disease at all. Then, how could we answer it to our conscience if we turned out this poor soul, and *her* child died?"

"No, no."

"We will use all precautions. The boys shall be moved to the other end of the house."

Mary Baines and her children had been placed in a small chamber, adjoining that at present occupied by the two elder boys. I proposed that I should change rooms with them; I had had small-pox, and was safe.

"Thank you, Phineas.—Be patient, love; trust in God, and have no fear."

Her husband's voice gradually calmed her again. She turned and clung round his neck, silently and long. Then she rose up, and went about her usual duties, just as though this horrible dread were not upon us.

Mary Baines and her children stayed in the house. Next day, about noon, the little lad died.

It was the first death that had ever happened under our roof. It shocked us all very much, especially the children. We kept them far away on the other side of the house—out of the house, when possible—but still they would be coming back and looking up at the window at which, so Muriel declared, the sick little boy "had turned into an angel and flown away". Their mother allowed the fancy to remain; she did not wish to fill her children's minds with gloomy thoughts of burial. It was arranged that the poor little body should be coffined and removed before the children rose next morning.

It was a very quiet tea-time. A sense of awe was upon the children, they knew not why. And when they heard poor Mary Baines crying overhead, Muriel asked "why she cried? How could she cry when it was God who had taken little Tommy?"

Afterwards, as I sat with her under the walnut tree, she tried to learn of me privately what sort of a place he had gone to, and how he went. And seeing that the child's mind was running on the subject, I thought it best to explain to her as simply as possible, the solemn putting off of life, and the putting on of immortality. I wished that my darling, who could never visibly behold death, should think of it as no terror, but only as a calm sleep and a joyful waking in another country, the glories of which "the eye has not seen nor the ear heard."

"Eye has not seen!" repeated Muriel thoughtfully; "*can* people see there, Uncle Phineas?"

"Yes, my child, all. There is no darkness there."

She paused a minute, and said earnestly: "I want to go—I very much want to go. How long do you think it will be before the angels come for me?"

"Many, many years, my precious one," said I, shuddering; for truly she looked so like them I began to fear they were close at hand.

We sent the children early to bed that night, and sat long by the fire, consulting how best the infection might be removed, and almost satisfied that in two days it could not have taken any great hold on the house. John was firm in his belief in the power of that new medical marvel, vaccination, and when at last we too retired we were greatly comforted.

The small closet where the dead child lay adjoined, as I have said, the room I now occupied—could be entered only *through* my room. I went to sleep thinking of the little corpse and dreamed of it afterwards.

In the middle of the night a slight noise woke me, and I almost fancied I was dreaming still; for I saw a little white figure gliding past my bed's foot; so softly and soundlessly,

it might have been the ghost of a child—and it went into the dead child's room.

For a moment the superstitious instinct which I believe we all have paralysed me. Then I tried to listen. There was most certainly a sound in the next room—a faint cry, quickly smothered—a very human cry. Conquering alike my superstitious dread and my fear of entering the infected room, I leaped out of bed, drew on some clothes, got a light, and went in.

There lay the little corpse, all safe and still. And like its own spirit, watching in the night at the foot of the forsaken clay, sat Muriel.

I snatched her up and ran with her out of the room in an agony of fear. She hid her face on my shoulder, trembling. "I have not done wrong, have I? I wanted to know what it was like—that which was left of little Tommy. I touched it—it was so cold. O Uncle Phineas! *that* isn't poor little Tommy?"

"No, my blessed one—no, my darling! Don't think of it any more."

Hardly knowing what was best to be done, I called John, and told him where I had found his little daughter. He never spoke, but snatched her out of my arms into his own, took her into his room, and shut the door.

From that time our fears never slumbered. For one whole week we waited, watching the children hour by hour, noting each change in each little face; then Muriel sickened.

It was I who had to tell her father, when, as he came home in the evening, I met him by the stream. It seemed to him the stroke of death.

"O, my God, not her! Not her! Not her!"

Edwin and Walter took the disease likewise, though lightly. No one in the house was in danger but Muriel. Terrible were those weeks of anxiety till the crisis was over. But at length, one November Sunday, Muriel came downstairs triumphantly, in her father's arms, and lay on the sofa smiling; the firelight dancing on her small white face—white but

unscarred. Older, perhaps—the round prettiness of childhood had gone—but her whole appearance wore that inexpressible expression, in which, for want of a better word, we embody our vague notions of the unknown world, and call “angelic”.

In the afternoon, when the boys were playing in the kitchen, and John and I were standing at the open door, we heard, after its long silence, Muriel’s “voice”. Soft and slow came the notes of the old harpsichord; and her parents looked at one another, their hearts full of thankfulness and joy.

But as the days passed we noticed that Muriel did not recover her desire to be active with her brothers. She was content to lie quietly on the sofa, or to creep away to her instrument.

“Does Muriel feel quite well to-day?” her parents would ask, with difficulty concealing their anxiety. And she always answered with her gentle smile, “Quite well.”

CHAPTER XIV

WE had other troubles too that winter. Lord Luxmore had not forgotten the election; the repairs which he had promised to make to the mills had not been carried out; and once again John would not go to law to force him. When spring came a move to Mrs. Tod's cottage, at Enderley, close to the mills themselves, was decided upon.

"Is it absolutely necessary we should go?" said the mother, who had a strong home-clinging.

"I think so, but it will not be for long. Our troubles cannot last, let Lord Luxmore do what he will. If we re-let Longfield for one summer to Sir Ralph Oldtower—if I can be close at hand and keep the mills under constant supervision, we shall save enough to put them in thorough repair ourselves; and add a steam engine too."

Now the last was a daring scheme, discussed many a time on a winter's night by us three in the Longfield parlour. At first Mrs. Halifax had looked grave—in those days innovation and improvements were regarded as synonymous with ruin. But now at the mention of the steam-engine she looked up, and smiled encouragingly.

"Never fear, John; you will make your fortune yet, in spite of Lord Luxmore."

Not long after we moved in a body to Enderley. Though the chief reason was that John might be constantly on the spot, I fancied I could detect a secondary reason, a hope that his beloved Muriel might recover a fuller health and activity in new surroundings. And, indeed, Muriel did brighten before she had been there many days. She began to throw off her listlessness, and to go with me everywhere. How strange, and how delightful, it was to be back again with the good Mrs. Tod; unchanged in anything but her age—and still as devoted to us as ever.

John himself was much occupied now. He left his Norton Bury business under efficient care, and devoted himself almost wholly to the cloth-mill. Early and late he was there; very often Muriel and I followed him, and spent whole mornings in the mill-meadows. Through them the stream on which the machinery depended was led by various contrivances, checked or increased in its flow, making small ponds, locks, or waterfalls. Often the father would come out to us and remain for a few minutes—fondling Muriel, and telling me how things went on at the mill.

One morning we sat there, on the brickwork of a little bridge, underneath an elm tree, round the roots of which the water made a pool so clear, that we could see a large pike lying like a black shadow half-way down. John suddenly said:

“What is the matter with the stream? Do you notice, Phineas?”

“I have seen it gradually lowering these last two hours. I thought you were drawing off the water.”

“Nothing of the kind—I must find out what is causing it. Good-bye, my little daughter. Don’t cling so fast, my pet—Father will be back soon. Isn’t this a sweet, sunny place for a little maid to be lazy in?”

His tone was gay, but he had an anxious look. He walked rapidly away down the meadows, and went up in his mill. Then I saw him retracing his steps, examining where the stream entered the bounds of his little property. Finally he walked off towards the little town at the head of the valley—beyond which, buried in woods, lay Luxmore Hall. It was two hours before we saw him again.

Then he came towards us, narrowly watching the stream. It had sunk more and more—its muddy bottom was plainly showing.

“Yes, Phineas, it is as I feared. I did not think he would have dared to do it.”

“Do what, John? Who?”

“Lord Luxmore.” He spoke in the smothered tones of

violent passion. "Lord Luxmore has turned out of its course the stream that works my mill."

"Oh, no, John; impossible: it is against the law."

"Not against the law of the great against the little! Besides he gives a decent colouring—his steward says he only wants to use the stream three days a week, to make fountains at Luxmore Hall. But I see what it is; he is determined to ruin me."

Muriel gently asked her father what ruin meant. "Was anybody making Father angry?"

"No, my sweet—not angry—only very, very miserable," said he, again lifting her in his arms.

"Never mind, Father. You say nothing signifies, if we are good. And you are *always* good."

"I wish I were." He sat down with the child on his knees, looking very anxious. But by-and-by his spirit rose, as it always did, when a heavy challenge was made to it.

"No, Lord Luxmore shall not ruin me! I have thought of a scheme. But first I must speak to my people. I shall have to shorten wages for a time."

"How soon?"

"To-night. If it must be done—better done at once, before winter sets in. Poor fellows, it will go hard with them—they'll be hard on me. But it's only temporary. I must reason them into patience, if I can. God knows, it is not they alone who want it."

"If it is an unlawful act, why not go to law?"

"You forget my principle: never to go to law. No, that is not the way." I urged no more, and he continued. "Now, Phineas, you go home with Muriel. Tell Ursula what has occurred—say I will come to tea as soon as I can. I may have some trouble with my people here; but she must not alarm herself."

No, the mother never did. To-night she heard all my explanation; understood it all, I think, more clearly than I did. She saw at once, that the position was very grave.

"You think John is right?" I asked.

"Of course I do, Phineas."

It was not meant as a question, or even a doubt. But it was pleasant to hear her thus answer. She said no more, but put the children to bed; then came downstairs to the kitchen with her bonnet on.

"Will you come with me, Phineas? Or are you too tired? I am going down to the mill."

We started at once, walking quickly. It was almost dark, and we met no one else except a young man, whom I had occasionally seen about in the evenings. He was rather odd-looking, being invariably muffled up in a large cloak and a foreign sort of hat.

"Who is that watching our mills?" said Mrs. Halifax hastily.

I told her all I had seen of the person.

"A Papist, most likely—I mean a Catholic." (John objected to the opprobrious word Papist). "Mrs. Tod says there are many hidden hereabouts. They used to find shelter at Luxmore Hall."

That name set both our thoughts anxiously wandering; and not till we reached the foot of the hill did I notice that the odd-looking person had followed us almost to the mill gates.

In his empty mill, standing beside one of his silenced looms, we found the master. He was very much dejected—Ursula touched his arm before he even saw her.

"Never mind, John dear."

"I would not—except for my poor people."

"What do you intend doing? That which you have wished to do all the year?"

"Our wishes come as a cross to us sometimes," he said, rather bitterly. "It is the only thing I can do. The water power being so much lessened, I must either stop the mills or work them by steam."

"Do that, then. Set up your steam-engine."

"And have all the country down on me for destroying hand labour? Have a new set of Luddites coming to burn

my mill, and break my machinery? Lord Luxmore is determined to ruin me. Worse than that, he is ruining my good name. If you had heard those poor people I sent away to-night! What must they, who will have short work these two months—what must they think of their master?"

He spoke—as rarely we heard John speak; as worldly cares and worldly injustice cause the best of men to speak sometimes.

"Poor people!" he added, "how can I blame them? I was actually dumb before them to-night, when they said I must take the cost of what I do. They must have bread for their children. But so must I for mine. Lord Luxmore is the cause of it all."

Here I heard—or fancied I heard—out of the black shadow beyond the loom—a heavy sigh. John and Ursula were too deep in thought to notice it.

Ursula asked if nothing could be done to maintain the men's wages.

"Yes, I can think of one way, but——"

Ursula knew what he meant; and so did I. A portion of the capital which she had received had never been used by John in his business. It had been set aside for the security of his wife and children. "Use what is needed of it, John," said Ursula.

"It would not be too much sacrifice, love?"

"How can you talk so? We could do it easily by living in a plainer way; giving up one or two trifles. Only outside things, you know. Why need we care for trifles?"

"Why, indeed?" he said, in a low, forced tone.

So they decided it all—in fewer words than I have taken to write it. It was so easy to decide when both were of one mind.

"Now," said John, rising as if a load were taken off his breast—"now, do what he will, Lord Luxmore shall not harm us."

Again that sigh in the darkness—and this time they heard it too.

"Who's there?"

"Only I. Mr. Halifax—don't be angry with me."

It was the softest, mildest voice—the voice of one long used to oppression, and then the strange-looking young man we had seen on the way appeared from behind the loom. He removed his hat and muffler, and we all recognized him, with astonishment. It was the son of our implacable enemy.

"I am surprised to see you here, Lord William Ravenel."

"Hush; I hate the very sound of the name. I would have renounced it long ago, I would have hidden myself away from him and the world, if he would have let me."

"He—do you mean your father?" The young man silently assented, as if afraid to utter the name.

"Would not your coming here displease him?" said John, always tenacious of trenching a hairbreadth upon lawful authority.

"It matters not—he is away. He has left me there six months, alone at Luxmore. He hates me because I am a Catholic, and wish to become a monk."

The youth crossed himself, then started and looked round, as if in terror of observers. "You are a good man, Mr. Halifax. You spoke warmly for us, I remember. You will not betray me?"

Mr. Halifax smiled at such a possibility. Yet, in truth, there was some reason for the young man's fears, since, even in those days, Catholics were hunted down both by law and by public opinion, as virulently as Protestant nonconformists.

"But why do you wish to leave the world?"

"I am sick of it—sick of its sins and follies—its oppressions and cruelties."

It was easy to understand how a young man of conscience must have been sickened by that worldly, unprincipled lord, his father, and by that debased creature, his sister's husband, Mr. Brithwood. Lady Caroline herself, as we knew, had left her husband, and was now living apart from him on the Continent. Ursula regarded the young man (her own cousin

by marriage) with pitying eyes. She spoke to him kindly, asking him if he would go home with us.

He looked exceedingly surprised. "I—you cannot mean it? After Lord Luxmore has done you all this evil."

"Is that any reason why we should not do good to his son?" said John.

The lad lifted his soft grey eyes; and then I remembered that his sister had once told us of Lord Ravenel's enthusiastic admiration of Mr. Halifax. "Oh, you could, you could! Only let me come and see you and your children."

"Come, and welcome."

In the months that followed Lord Ravenel was a frequent visitor to Rose Cottage, and conceived a great attachment to all the family. But to blind Muriel he became especially devoted. He would sit gazing upon her almost as if she were his guardian angel—his patron saint. And the little maid, in her quiet way, was very fond of him. A bond between them was the love which they shared for music. It was he who taught her to play the organ in the near-by church.

Except on two days a week, the mill was now idle. But John Halifax was setting up in his mill that wonderful novelty—a steam engine. He had already been to Manchester and elsewhere, and seen how the new power was applied by Arkwright, Hargreaves and others; his own ingenuity and mechanical knowledge furnished the rest. We saw little of him in these days, for he worked early and late—often with his own hands—aided by a few men he had brought from Manchester. For it was necessary to keep the secret—especially in our primitive valley—until the thing was complete. So the ignorant, simple mill people, when they came for the easy Saturday wages, only stood and gaped at the mass of iron and the curiously-shaped brickwork, and wondered what on earth "the master" was about. But he was so thoroughly "the master", with all his kindness, that no one ventured either to question or interfere.

Summer waned. The mornings grew hazy and dewy.

We ceased to take Muriel out with us for our early walk along John's favourite "terrace", before anyone else was stirring—as we'd been in the habit of doing during the warmer weather. Her father missed her company sorely, but always kept repeating that "early walks were not good for children". At last he gave up the walk altogether, and used instead to sit with her on his knee in front of the cottage, till breakfast time.

After that, saying with a kind of jealousy "that everyone of us had more of his little daughter than he" he got into a habit of fetching her down to the mill everyday at noon, and carrying her about in his arms, wherever he went in his work, till the daylight began to fade, and I appeared to fetch her home. Many a time I have seen the rough, coarse, blue-handed women of the mill stop and look wistfully after "master and blind little miss". I often think that the quiet way in which the mill people took the introduction of machinery was partly owing to the almost superstitious interest which attached to the pale, sweet face of Muriel.

Enderley was growing dreary, and we began to anticipate the cosy fireside of Longfield.

"The children will all go home looking better than they came; do you not think so, Uncle Phineas?" said Ursula. "Especially Muriel."

To that question I had to answer with a vague assent; after which I was fain to rise and walk away—for in truth the improvement which the child had shown on first coming to Enderley had not been maintained; and with the approach of autumn she had begun to subside into her former lethargy.

When I came back, I found the mother and daughter talking mysteriously apart. I guessed what it was about, for I had overheard Ursula saying that they had better tell the child—it would be something for her to look forward to—something to amuse her next winter.

"It is a great secret, mind," the mother whispered.

"Oh, yes!" The tiny face, smaller than ever, I thought, flushed brightly. "But I do hope it is a little sister. Only—

and the child grew suddenly earnest—"will she be like me?"

"Possibly; sisters are often alike."

"No, I don't mean that; but—you know," and Muriel touched her own eyes.

"I cannot tell, my daughter. In all things else, pray God, she may be like you, Muriel, my darling," said Ursula, embracing her with tears.

The dignity of being the sole depository of this momentous information seemed for a time to put new life into this little maid of eleven years old. Upon gaining express permission to confide in me, she talked incessantly of the child that was coming—"little Maud" was the name she gave her. She started to make a pair of the daintiest elfin socks that were ever knitted. I found them, years after—one finished, one with the needles all rusty, stuck through the fine worsted ball—just as the child had laid it out of her hand. Ah, Muriel, Muriel!

The father took great delight in this change. "What a great comfort she will be to Ursula one day—an eldest daughter always is, Uncle Phineas."

I smiled assentingly. His burdens were heavy enough. I think I did right to smile.

"We must take her down with us to see the steam-engine first worked. I wish Ursula would have gone home without waiting for to-morrow. But there is no fear—my men are so quiet and good-humoured. What in most mills has been a day of outrage and dread is with us quite a festival. Boys, would you like to come?"

That evening, our last at Enderley, I accompanied Muriel into the empty church, where, almost in the dark—which was no dark to her—she sat and played for a long time. By-and-by the moon looked in, showing the gilt pipes of the organ, and the little fairy figure sitting below.

Once or twice she stooped from the organ loft to ask me where was Brother Anselmo—the name she had given to Lord Ravenel—who usually met us in the church of evenings, and whom this last night we had fully expected to see.

At last he came, sat down by me, and listened. She was playing a fragment of one of his Catholic masses. When it ended, he called, "Muriel!"

Her soft glad answer came down from the gallery.

"Child, play the 'Miserere' I taught you."

She obeyed, making the organ wail like a tormented soul; astonishing indeed was her power of performance.

"Now the 'Dies Irae'."

The child struck a few notes, heavy and dolorous, filling the church like a thunder-cloud—then suddenly left off, and opening the flute stop, burst into quite different music.

"That is Handel—I know that my Redeemer liveth'."

Exquisitely she played it, the clear treble notes seemed to utter like a human voice the very words:

"I know that my Redeemer liveth, and he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth.

"And though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God."

With that she ceased. "More, more!" we both cried.

"Not now—no more now," she said, shutting up the stops, and closing the organ.

"But my little Muriel has not finished her tune!"

"She will some day," said the child.

We all went out together, locking the church door.

Lord Ravenel was rather sad that night; he was going away from Luxmore for some time. We guessed why—because the earl was coming. Bidding us good-bye, he said mournfully to his little pet, "I wish I were not going away. Will you remember me, Muriel?"

"Always, Brother Anselmo, always." He kissed, not her cheek, but her little child hands, as if she had been the saint he worshipped, or, perhaps the woman whom afterwards he would learn to adore. Then he went away.

Next day was the one fixed for the trial of the new steam-engine; which trial being successful, we were to start at once in a post-chaise for Longfield; for the mother longed to be at home, and so did we all.

There was a rather dolorous good-bye, and much lamenting from Mrs. Tod, who now that her own bairns were grown up, thought there were no children worthy to compare with *our* children. John assured her over and over again that we should all come back next summer; and then we set off, on foot, down the steep hill—John carrying, hidden under many wraps and nestled close to his warm shoulder, his frail little winter rose—Muriel.

In front of the mill we found a considerable crowd; for the time being ripe, Mr. Halifax had made public the fact that he meant to work his looms by steam, the only way in which he could carry on the mill at all. The announcement had been received by his workpeople with remarkable quietness. Still there was the usual amount of scepticism incident upon any new experiment; and much doubting as to whether "the thing would work".

"Make way, my good people," said Mr. Halifax; and he crossed the mill yard, his wife on his arm, followed by an involuntary murmur of respect. "He be a fine fellow, the master; he sticks at nothing," I heard one man say, and there was a murmur of assent from those who stood near enough to hear. Only one man, as John passed through the crowd, raised the old fatal cry:

"Down with machinery."

Mr. Halifax swung round. "Who said that?"

At the sound of his voice the little knot of workpeople drew back, and the malcontent, whoever he was, shrunk into silence. "The master" walked on, entered his mill, and unlocked the door of the room he had turned into the engine room. With him went the two men he had brought from Manchester. They had worked—as the Manchester fellows said they had often been obliged to work—under lock and key.

The family followed them in, I with them. Beneath his outward calm, I could see that John was much excited. He went over the complicated but delicate machinery, piece by piece; rubbed here and there at the brasswork, which shone

as bright as a mirror; then stepped back, and eyed it with pride.

"Isn't it a pretty thing? If only I have set it up right—if it will but work!"

His hands shook—his cheeks were flaming; then he found some slight fault with the machinery, and while the workmen rectified it, stood watching them, breathless with anxiety. His wife came to his side, clasped his fingers with her own, strengthening, cheering. He faintly smiled.

"Here." He unlocked the door, and called to the people outside. "Come in, two of you fellows, and see how my steam-engine works. Now then!—Boys, keep out of the way of my little girl."—His voice softened.—"My pet will not be frightened?—Now, my men—ready?"

He opened the valve, and with a strange noise that made the Enderley men spring back as if the devil himself had been let loose, the steam came rushing into the cylinder. There was a slight motion of the piston rod.

"All's right! It will work!"

No, it stopped! John drew a breath. Then it went on again, beginning to move slowly up and down, like the strong right arm of some automatic giant. It settled into a steady, rhythmic action. The monster was alive.

Speechless, John stood watching it. The trial over, his energies collapsed; he sat down by his wife's side, and taking Muriel on his knees, bent his head over hers.

"Is it all right, Father?"

"All quite right, my own."

"You said you could do it, and you have done it," cried his wife, her eyes glowing with triumph, her head erect and proud.

John dropped his lower, lower still. "Yes," he murmured. "Yes, thank God."

Then he let all the people in to behold the wondrous sight. They crowded in by dozens, first gaping with wonder at the miraculous machine; and then looking at the master as if he were something more than a man.

At length John was able to take his wife and children out into the open air. Muriel, who had stood for the last few minutes by her father's side, listening with a pleased look to the monotonous regular sound, was reluctant to go.

"I am glad I was with you to-day—very glad, Father," she kept repeating. *He* said as often—twice as often—that next summer, when she came back to Enderley, she should be at the mill every day, and all day long, if she liked.

There was now nothing to be done but to hasten as quickly and merrily as possible home, to our well-beloved Longfield.

Waiting for the post-chaise, Ursula and the boys sat down on the bridge over the defunct and silent waterfall, on the muddy steps of which, where the stream used to dash, weed and long grasses and water-fern were already beginning to grow.

"It looks desolate, but we need not mind that now," said the mother.

"No," her husband answered. "Steam power once obtained I can apply it in any way I choose. My people will not hinder me; they trust me, they like me."

"And, perhaps, are just a little afraid of you. No matter, it is a wholesome fear. I should not like to have married a man no one was afraid of."

John smiled. Then he noticed a horseman riding towards us along the road. "I do believe that is Lord Luxmore. I wonder if he has heard of my steam-engine. Love, will you go back into the mill?"

"Certainly not. I will stay here." And the mother seated herself on the bridge, her younger children around her. But two angry spots burnt in her cheeks when Lord Luxmore came up, and, in passing, bowed.

Mrs. Halifax returned it haughtily enough. But at that moment a loud cheer broke out from the mill hard by, and "Hurrah for the master!" "Hurrah for Mr. Halifax!" was distinctly heard. The mother smiled right proudly.

Lord Luxmore turned blandly to his tenant. "What is that rather harsh noise I hear, Mr. Halifax?"

"It is my men cheering me."

"Oh, how charming! so grateful, to the feelings. And *why* do they cheer, may I ask?"

John briefly told him, speaking with the same courtesy with which he was addressed.

"And this steam-engine will greatly advantage your mill?"

"It will, my lord. It renders me independent of your stream, of which the fountains of Luxmore Hall may now have the full monopoly."

It would not have been human nature if a spice of triumph had not sparkled in John's eyes as he said this. He was now walking by the horse's side, as Lord Luxmore had politely requested him.

"I do not quite understand you. Would you do me the favour to repeat your sentence?"

Guy and Muriel were with him, and I followed close behind. They had gone a little way up the hill out of sight of Ursula.

"Merely, my lord, that your cutting off the water-course has been to me one of the greatest advantages I ever had in my life. My men might have resented the steam-engine; now they welcome it. It secures their employment. Allow me to thank you."

The earl looked in John's face without answering, then spurred his horse violently.

Guy was in the ditch, gathering flowers; but Muriel—For the first time in our lives we had forgotten Muriel!

She stood in the horse's path—the helpless, blind child. The next instant she was knocked down. I never heard a curse on John Halifax's lips but once—that once. Lord Luxmore heard it too. The image of the frantic father, snatching up his darling from under the horse's heels, must have haunted the earl's memory for many a long day.

He dismounted, saying anxiously, "I hope the little girl is not hurt. It was an accident—you see—pure accident."

But John did not hear. He knelt with the child in his arms by a little runnel in the ditch bank. When the water touched her she opened her sightless eyes.

"My little darling."

Muriel smiled, and nestled to him. "Indeed I am not hurt, dear Father."

Lord Luxmore, standing by, seemed much relieved, and again pressed his apologies. No answer.

"Go away!" sobbed out Guy, shaking both his fists in the earl's face. "Go away—or I'll kill you—wicked man! I would have done if you had killed my sister."

Lord Luxmore laughed at the boy's fury, threw him a guinea, which Guy threw back at him with all his might, and rode placidly away.

"Guy—Guy," called the faint soft voice of the little maid, "don't be angry. Father, don't let him be angry."

But the father was wholly occupied with Muriel—looking into her face, and feeling all her fragile little limbs. It seemed that, by a miracle, she was not injured. But her silence and pallor soon began to alarm us. Ursula, by this time, had come up, her face as pale as her child's.

"John, what has happened?" she asked anxiously. "What has happened to Muriel?"

I told her. "What must be done?" I asked her; for at this moment it was no use asking John anything. All this while the post-chaise intended to carry us back to Longfield had been waiting.

"We must go back to Enderley," she said decidedly. "The post-chaise must be dismissed."

So, giving Muriel into her father's arms, she led the way, and, a melancholy procession, we again ascended the hill to Rose Cottage.

Without any discussion, our plans were tacitly changed; no more was said about going home to dear Longfield. For Muriel lay, day after day, on her little bed upstairs, or on the parlour sofa, never complaining, but never attempting to

move or talk. When we asked her if she felt ill, she always answered, "Oh, no! only so tired. Nothing more."

Once, when she caught a note of particular anxiety in her father's voice, she got up and attempted to walk, catching at tables and chairs for support. At last she began to stagger, and said, half crying: "I can't. I am so tired. Oh, do take me in your arms, dear Father."

Her father took her, looked long in her sightless face, then turned his head against her shoulder. And I think it was at that moment he fully realized, for the first time, that his darling was a dying child.

He held her in his arms all day. He invented all sorts of little games and amusements for her; and when she was tired of these, he let her nestle against him and sleep. After her bedtime he asked me to go out with him on the Flat. We took our walk along the terrace, without exchanging a word. Then John said hastily:

"I am glad her mother was busy to-day—too busy to notice. She must not on any account be led to imagine, or to fear—anything. At this time nothing must distress her."

He spoke almost angrily. I answered a few quietening words. We were silent, until, over the common, we caught sight of the light in Muriel's window. Then I felt rather than heard the father's groan.

"Oh God! my only daughter! my dearest child!"

A week or two after this Ursula gave birth to her baby—a little sister for Muriel.

Muriel was the first to whom the news was told. Her father told it.

"She is come, darling! little Maud is come—I have two daughters now.

"I am glad, Father—so glad," she said, very gently.

"What are you thinking of, my pet?"

"That—though Father has another daughter, I hope he will remember the first one sometimes."

"My darling! what do you mean?" But the words smote

him to his heart's core. He sat down beside her, and she crept into his arms!

"What day is it, Father?"

"The first of December."

"I am glad. Little Maud's birthday will be in the same month as mine. This month it will be eleven years since I was born, will it not, Father?"

"Yes, my darling."

"What a long time! Then, when my sister is as old as I am, I shall be—that is, I should have been—a grown woman. Fancy me twenty years old, as tall as mother, wearing a gown like hers, talking and ordering, and busy about the house! How funny!" And then she laughed again. "Oh, no, Father, I couldn't do it. I had better remain always your little Muriel, weak and small, who likes to creep close to you, and go to sleep in this way."

She ceased talking; very soon she was sound asleep. But—the father!

Muriel faded, though slowly, till one day she was too weak to leave her bed. Ursula at the time was still confined to her room, but when at last she was able to come down to dinner, she at once noticed the vacant place at the table.

"John, where is Muriel?"

"She seems to feel this bitter weather a good deal," said John; "I thought it best that she should not come down to-day."

"No," added Guy, dolefully, "sister has not been down for a great many days."

Ursula started, looked first at her husband, and then at me.

"Why did nobody tell me this?"

"Love, there was nothing to be told."

"Has Dr. Jessop seen her?"

"Several times."

"Mother," said Guy, eager to comfort, for naughty though he sometimes was, he was the most tender-hearted of all the

boys, "sister isn't ill a bit, I know. She was laughing and talking like anything with me just now—saying she knows she could carry baby a great deal better than I could."

The mother kissed him in her quick eager way, and looked more satisfied. Nevertheless she hurried through her meal, and then insisted that she must go upstairs to Muriel. John turned pale, but seeing that she was determined, he asked me and the boys to leave him alone with her. And then, for the second time at Rose Cottage, he prepared her for the loss of a dear one. And this, of the two, was by far the harder grief to bear.

I was sitting by Muriel's bed when they came upstairs. Guy was there too; and our darling lay listening to her brother, who was squatted on her pillow, making all sorts of funny talk. There was a smile on her face; she looked quite rosy: I hoped that Ursula would not notice the great change the last weeks had made in her.

But she did. For a moment I saw her recoil, then turn to her husband with a dumb piteous, desperate look, as though to say, "Help me! my sorrow is more than I can bear."

But Muriel, hearing the step, cried with a joyful cry, "Mother! it's my mother!"

Muriel shed a tear or two, in a satisfied, peaceful way; the mother did not weep at all. Her self-command, so far as speech went, was miraculous. For her look—but then she knew the child was blind.

"Mother," said Muriel, after a while, "I do so want to 'see' little Maud!"

The new baby was carried upstairs proudly by Mrs. Tod, Edwin and Walter following. Quite a levee was held round the bed, where, laid close beside her, her weak hands being guided over the tiny face and form, Muriel first "saw" her little sister.

She smiled. "How fat she is! and her head is so round, and her hair feels so soft. What colour is it? Like mine?"

It was, nearly the same shade. Maud bore, the mother declared, the strongest likeness to Muriel.

"I am so glad. But these?" touching her eyes anxiously.

"No—my darling. Not like you there," was the low answer.

"I am *very* glad. I wonder if she can see me. Little Maud, I should like you to see sister."

"She does see, of course. How she stares!" cried Guy. And Muriel sighed contentedly, and lay back quietly on her pillow, with her little sister fondly hugged to her breast.

The father and mother looked on. It was such a picture—their five darlings close together; with Muriel and the babe the centre of the group.

The boys were wildly happy. All the afternoon they kept up their innocent games at Muriel's bedside, she sometimes sharing, and sometimes listening. It seems strange now to remember that Sunday afternoon, and how merry we all were; how we drank tea in the queer bedroom at the top of the house; and how Muriel went to sleep with baby Maud in her arms.

While she slept John kept his boys as quiet as mice by the broad window-seat. But when daylight had faded she was awakened by the baby's cries; and very unwillingly she let her go.

"I wish she might stay with me just this one night. Please, Mother, may she stay?"

"We will both stay, my darling. I shall not leave you again."

"I am so glad," and once more she turned round, as if to sleep.

"Are you tired, my pet?" said John, looking intently at her. "Shall I take your brothers downstairs?"

"Not yet, dear Father."

"What would you like then?"

"Only to lie here this Sunday evening, among you all."

He asked her if she would like him to read aloud, as he generally did on Sunday evenings. And when Muriel said that she would like it, he read from the Bible their favourite story of Joseph and his brethren. At last he ceased; shut the Bible, and put it aside. And then the group—that last perfect household picture—was broken up. It melted away into things of the past, and became only a picture for evermore.

“Now, boys, it is time to say good night. There, go and kiss your sister.”

“Which?” said Edwin in his funny way; “we’ve got two sisters now.”

“I’ll thrash you if you say that again,” cried Guy. “Which, indeed? Maud is but the baby. Muriel will be always ‘sister’.”

“Sister” faintly laughed as she answered his fond kiss. Guy was often thought to be her favourite brother.

“Now, off with you, boys; and go downstairs quietly—mind, I say quietly.”

They obeyed—that is, as literally as boy nature can obey such an admonition.

John and I sat up late together that night. He could not rest, even though he told me he had left the mother and her two daughters as cosy as a nest of wood-pigeons. At last he went upstairs again, and brought word that mother and children were all fast asleep.

“I think I may leave them till daylight to-morrow. And now, Uncle Phineas, you go to bed, for you look as tired as can be.”

I went to bed; but all night long I had disturbed dreams. And continually towards morning, I fancied I heard through my window, which faced the church, the faint, distant sound of the organ as when Muriel used to play it.

Long before it was light I rose. As I passed the boys’ room, Guy called out to me:

“Halloa! Uncle Phineas, is it a fine morning?—for I want to go down to the beech-wood and get a lot of nuts and fir cones for sister. It’s her birthday, you know.”

But those nuts and cones were never gathered. For in the early hours, our darling, still asleep in her mother's arms, had passed quietly away—to join the saints of God, of whose bright band she must surely be one.

CHAPTER XV

WE went home, leaving all that was mortal of our darling beneath the snows in the Enderley churchyard.

For twelve years then we lived at Longfield; in such unbroken, uneventful peace, that looking back seems like looking back over a level sea whose leagues of tiny ripples make one large glassy plain.

Let me recall—as the first wave that rose, ominous of change—a certain spring evening when Ursula and I were sitting, as our habit was in warm weather, under the walnut tree.

“John is late home this evening,” said she, breaking the long silence. But even as she spoke we heard the carriage wheels, for Mr. Halifax, a prosperous man now, drove daily to and from his mills in as tasteful an equipage as any of the country gentry round about.

His wife went down to the stream to meet him as usual, and they came up the field path together. Both were changed from the John and Ursula of whom I last wrote. She, active and fresh-looking still, but settling into that large fairness which is not unbecoming in a lady of middle-age; he inclined to a slight stoop, with the lines of his face more sharply defined, and the hair—though still brown—wearing off his forehead up to the crown.

As soon as he had spoken to me, he looked round as usual for his children, and asked if Maud and the boys would be home to tea.

“I think Guy and Walter never do come home in time when they go over to the Manor House,” said Ursula.

“They’re young—let them enjoy themselves,” said the father, smiling, “and you know, love, of all our ‘fine’ friends, there are none of whom you approve so heartily as you do of the Oldtowers.”

These were not of the former race. Good old Sir Ralph had gone to his rest, and Sir Herbert reigned in his stead—Sir Herbert who, in his dignified gratitude, never forgot a certain day when he had first made the acquaintance of Mr. Halifax. From that day our friendship with the Oldtowers had dated. But as John's prosperity grew, so had the eagerness of other "county families" to number John among their acquaintances; it often amused us to notice the distinction made by these between John Halifax, the tanner of Norton Bury, and Mr. Halifax, the rich owner of Enderley Mills. They found it convenient now to remember that Ursula March was a well-connected lady, and that her father had been a governor of the West Indies. John however had all his life been averse to what is called "society"; had eschewed mere "acquaintance". Consequently our circle of associations was far more limited than that of many families holding an equal position with us.

"I do think this place is growing prettier every day," said John, when tea being over, we went out again to the walnut-tree bench. Phineas, you are the one for remembering dates. How long have we been at Longfield?"

"Thirteen years."

"Ah, so long."

"Not too long," said Ursula earnestly. "I hope we may end our days here. Do not you, John?"

He paused before answering. "Yes, I do wish it; but I am not sure how far right it would be to do it."

"We will not open that subject again," said Ursula uneasily. "I thought we had all made up our minds that Longfield is a thousand times pleasanter than Beechwood, grand as it is. But John thinks he can never do enough for his people at Enderley."

"Not that alone, love. Other reasons combined. Sometimes I fancy my life has grown too easy. I am forty-five. Once I hoped to do wonderful things ere I was forty-five; but somehow the desire has faded."

His wife and I were silent. We both knew the truth; that

calm as had flowed his outer existence, in which was omitted not one actual duty, still the sorrow he had endured twelve years ago had robbed his achievements of their savour. Something of her father had died with Muriel; it could not be otherwise.

"You forget," said his wife tenderly, "how much you have been doing, and intend to do. What with your improvements at Enderley and your Catholic Emancipation—your Abolition of Slavery and your Parliamentary Reform—why there is hardly any scheme for good, public or private, to which you do not lend a helping hand."

"A helping purse, perhaps, which is an easier thing, much."

"I will not have you blaming yourself. Dear Uncle Phineas, what better could John have done all these years than look after his mills and educate his three sons?"

"Have them educated rather," corrected he, sensitive over his painfully-gained and limited acquirements. Yet this feeling had made him doubly careful to give his boys every possible advantage of study, short of sending them from home, to which he had an invincible objection. And three finer lads, or better educated, could not be found in the whole county.

"I think, John, Guy has got over his fancy for going to Cambridge with Ralph Oldtower."

"Yes, college life would not have done for Guy," said the father thoughtfully.

"Hush! we must not talk about them, for here come the children themselves."

It was a mere figure of speech to call them so—these two tall lads, Guy and Walter—who in the dusk looked as man-like as their father.

"Where is your sister, boys?"

"Maud stopped by the stream with Edwin," answered Guy, rather carelessly. His heart had kept its childish faith; the youngest, pet as she was, was never anything to him but "little Maud". And a moment later the child was seen,

coming up on Edwin's arm.—*He* was the brother whose company she loved best. In hair and complexion there was a likeness to her dead sister; but in spirit nothing could have been more different than this sprightly elf, at once our plague and our joy.

She and Edwin stole away, chattering merrily. Guy sat down by his mother, and slipped his arm round her waist. (Delightful indeed was the natural, spontaneous affection these lads showed for their mother.) "Guy, you foolish boy!" as she took his cap off and pushed back his hair, trying not to look proud of his handsome face; "what have you been doing all day!"

"Making myself agreeable, Mother."

"That he has," corroborated Walter, whose great object of hero-worship was his eldest brother. "He talked with Lady Oldtower, and he sang with Miss Oldtower and Miss Grace. Never was there such a fellow as our Guy."

"Nonsense!" said his mother, while Guy only laughed, too accustomed to this family admiration to be much harmed thereby.

"When does Ralph Oldtower return to Cambridge?"

"Not at all. He is going to leave college, and be off to help the Greeks. Father, do you know everybody is joining the Greeks. Even Lord Byron is off with the rest. I only wish I were."

"Heaven forbid," muttered his mother.

"Why not? I should have liked it better than anything."

"Better than being my right hand at the mills, and your mother's at home? I think not, Guy."

"You are right, Father," was the answer, with an uneasy look. For this description seemed less what Guy was than what he desired him to be. With his easy, happy temper, generous but uncertain, and his showy brilliant parts, he was not half so much to be depended on as the grave Edwin, who was already a thorough man of business, and worked at the mill with indomitable perseverance.

Soon we went indoors. Ursula settled to her needlework; John to his arm-chair and newspaper. Guy and Walter were together by the unshuttered window. Edwin sat, reading hard, his fingers stuck through his hair, developing the whole of his broad, knobbled, knotted forehead, where, Maud declared, the wrinkles had already begun to show. For mistress Maud, she flitted about in all directions, interrupting everything, and doing nothing.

"Maud," said her father at last, "I am afraid you give a deal of trouble to Uncle Phineas."

Uncle Phineas tried to soften the fact, but the little lady was certainly the most trying of his pupils, never able to apply herself for long to her work. As with her brothers, I had undertaken all the early part of her education, tutors succeeding me as became necessary. The plan of now engaging a governess for Maud had already been discussed more than once.

"Love, when I was waiting to-day at Jessop's bank——"

(Ah! that was another change. Our good doctor and wife had both passed away, and his brother and heir had turned the dining-room into a "County Bank—open from ten till four".)

"While waiting there," John continued, "I heard of a lady who struck me as likely to be an excellent governess for Maud."

"Indeed!" said Mrs. Halifax, not over enthusiastically. Maud became eager to know "what the lady was like", I at the same time inquiring "who was she?"

"Who? I really did not ask. But Jessop tells me that she is a good daughter, who has been teaching in Norton Bury—anybody's children for any sort of pay—in order to maintain an ailing mother. Ursula, you would let her teach our Maud, I know."

"Is she an Englishwoman?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Would she have to live with us?"

"I think so, decidedly."

"Then it can't be. The house will not accommodate her. Longfield will hardly hold even ourselves."

"But—we may have to leave Longfield."

The boys here turned to listen; for this question had already been mooted in their presence—in our family there were no secrets.

"Leave Longfield!" repeated Ursula. "Surely—surely——" But, seeing her husband gazing into the fire with an anxious air, her tone of impatience ceased. "Don't let us discuss that question—at least not to-night. It troubles you, John. Put it off till to-morrow."

But that was never his habit. He was one of those very few who, a thing being to be done, will not trust it to uncertain to-morrows. His wife saw that he wished to talk to her, and listened.

"Yes, the question does trouble me a good deal. Whether, now that our children are growing up, and our income is doubling and trebling year by year, we ought to widen our circle of usefulness, or close it up permanently within the quiet bounds of little Longfield. Which say you, love?"

"The latter, the latter—because it is far the happiest."

"I am afraid *not* the latter, because it *is* the happiest."

The children were listening eagerly, but in curiosity rather than regret. "After much serious consideration, I think that we ought to leave Longfield," the father continued. "I have been again over Beechwood Hall. You all remember Beechwood?"

Yes. It was the "great house" at Enderley, just on the slope of the hill, below Rose Cottage.

"It has been empty for a great many years, Father. Would it be a good investment to buy it?"

"I think so, Edwin, my practical lad," the father answered smiling. "What say you, children? Would you like living there?"

There was no doubt where the young people's inclinations lay. Guy's countenance brightened at the notion of "lots of shooting and fishing" about Enderley; and Maud counted on

the numerous visitors that would come to John Halifax, Esquire, of Beechwood Hall.

"I will tell you, boys, what are *my* reasons," said John. "When I was a young man, I had strongly impressed on my mind the wish to gain influence in the world. I thought I could use it better than most men—for the good of the poor and the oppressed. Now, twenty-five years of hard labour have won for me the position I desired. That is, I might have it for the claiming. I might take my place among the men who have lately risen from the people, to help and guide the people—the Cannings, Huskissons, Peels."

"Would you enter Parliament?"

"No, Guy, no. Wisdom, like charity begins at home. Let me attempt to rule in my own valley, among my own people, before I attempt to guide the State. But remember this, my children, if we go, we shall go, not to seek new pleasures, but to undertake wider responsibilities. Children, when I married your mother I had nothing, and she gave up everything for me. I said I would make her as high as any lady in the land—in fortune I then meant, thinking it would make her happy; but she and I are wiser now. We know that we can never be happier than we have been here at Longfield. By making her the lady of Beechwood I should double her responsibilities and treble her cares, give her an host of new duties, and no pleasures half so sweet as those we leave behind. Still, of herself and *for* herself, my wife shall decide."

Ursula looked up at him, "Thank you, John," she said gently. "I have decided. If you wish it, if you think it right, we will leave Longfield and go to Beechwood."

He stooped and kissed her forehead, saying only, "We will go."

The move had been made. We were settled at the Hall. To-day was a day of great importance: it was Guy's coming of age—and he looked every inch "the young heir" as, with

his father, he passed up and down the broad sunshiny walk before the breakfast-room. It was early—little past eight o'clock; but we kept Longfield hours and Longfield ways still.

Our faces were as bright as the day itself when we all gathered round the cosy breakfast-table. This part of the day was, by long established custom, an hour of family fun and family chat, before the busy cares of the day. No sour or dreary looks were ever brought to the breakfast-table.

Thus it was against all family custom when Mr. Halifax, laying down his paper with a grave countenance, said:

"This is very ill news. Ten bank failures in the *Gazette* to-day."

"But it will not harm *us*, Father."

"Edwin is always thinking of 'us' and 'our' business," remarked Guy rather sharply. It was one of the slight—the very slight—jars in our household that these two lads, excellent lads both, as they grew into manhood, did not exactly "pull together".

"Edwin is scarcely wrong in thinking of 'us', since upon us depend so many," observed the father quietly. "Yet we must not be blind or indifferent to the misfortunes of others. We must not parade our good fortune by launching out into any of Guy's magnificences—eh, my boy?"

The youth looked down. It was well-known that since we came to Beechwood his pleasure-loving temperament had wanted all sorts of changes in our style of living.

"You may call it 'magnificence', but I know I should like to live a little more as our neighbours do. And I think we ought——"

He stopped abruptly, for at that moment the door opened, and the tall, grave, sad-looking, sad-clothed Miss Silver, Maud's governess, entered. She had been with us four months—ever since we came to Beechwood.

One of the boys rose and offered her a chair; for the parents set an example of treating her with entire respect—nay, would gladly have made her altogether one of the family,

had she not been so very reserved. But Miss Silver, declining the kindness, passed on to her own seat opposite.

Ursula busied herself over the breakfast equipage rather nervously. Though an admirable young woman, Miss Silver, in her extreme and all but repellent quietness, was one whom the mother found it difficult to get on with.

To-day was to be a general holiday for both master and servants; a dinner for the workers at the mills, and in the evening something which, though we called it tea-drinking, began to look, I was amused to see, exceedingly like a ball. But on this occasion both the parents had yielded to their young people's wishes, and half the neighbourhood had been invited by the universally popular Mr. Guy Halifax to celebrate his coming of age.

After breakfast we all dispersed, Guy and Walter to ride to the Manor House, Edwin going off somewhere with his sister. John asked me to take a walk with him, in the course of which we stood a moment by the low churchyard wall, and looked over at the plain white marble stone which covered our darling's grave. Her father read the inscription: "Muriel Joy Halifax, 'Whereas I was blind, now I see', December 5, 1813." He sighed. "She would have been quite a woman now, Phineas. How strange! My little Muriel!"

He sighed again, deeply, and we continued a while in silence. Then he began talking of the other children, especially Maud; and then of Miss Silver, her governess.

"I wish she were more likeable, John," I said. "It vexes me sometimes to see how coldly she returns Ursula's kindness."

"Poor thing!—she has evidently not been used to much kindness. You should have seen how amazed she looked yesterday when we paid her a little more than her salary, and my wife gave her a pretty silk dress to wear to-night. I hardly knew whether she would refuse it, or burst out crying."

"You think well of her?"

"For most things, yes. And I sincerely respect her, or of course, she would not be here. I think people should be as

particular over choosing their daughter's governesses as their son's wife; and having chosen, should show her almost equal honour."

"You'll have your sons choosing themselves wives soon, John. I fancy Guy has a very soft place in his heart for that pretty Grace Oldtower."

But the father made no answer. He was always tenacious over the slightest approach to such jests as these. And besides at this moment Mr. Brown, Lord Luxmore's steward, passed—riding solemnly along. He barely touched his hat to Mr. Halifax.

"Poor Mr. Brown! He has a grudge against me for those Mexican speculations I refused to embark in; he did, and lost everything but what he gets from Lord Luxmore. I do think the country has been running mad this year over speculation. There is sure to come a panic afterwards, and indeed it seems already beginning."

"But you are secure? Did I not hear you say you were not afraid of losing a single penny?"

"Yes—unfortunately," with a troubled smile.

"John, what do you mean?"

"I mean, that to stand upright with one's neighbours falling about one is a most trying position. Misfortune makes people unjust. The other day at the sessions I got cold looks enough from my brother magistrates. And you saw that article in the *Norton Bury Mercury* about 'grasping plebeian millionaires'—'wool-spinners, spinning out their country's vitals'. That's meant for me, Phineas. Don't look incredulous, yes—for me. They see I thrive and others fail—my mills are the only cloth-mills in full work, and I have more hands than I can employ. Every week I am obliged to send newcomers away. Then they raise the old cry that my machinery had ruined labour. So you see, for all Guy says about our prosperity, I do not sleep exactly on a bed of roses."

"You who have always cared so deeply for the welfare of your people! It is wicked—monstrous!"

"Not at all. Only natural—the penalty one has to pay for

success. It will die out most likely; meanwhile, we will mind it as little as we can."

"But you are safe?—your life——" For a sudden fear crossed me—a fear not unwarranted by more than one event of this terrible year—1825—when unemployment and destitution were rife.

"Safe?—yes"—and his eyes were lifted—"I believe my life is safe—if I have work to do. Still, for others' sake, I have carried for a month past, whenever I go to and from the Coltham bank, with my cash-box—this."

He showed me, peering out of his breast pocket, a small pistol. I was greatly startled.

"Does your wife know?"

"Of course. But she knows too that nothing but the last extremity would force me to use it. God grant I never may! But don't let's speak of it."

We dismissed the subject, and for the remainder of our walk talked of pleasanter things.

Pleasant too was the mill-yard dinner. It did one's heart good to hear the cheer with which Mr. Halifax's men and their families greeted "the master", ay, and "the young master" also, who was to-day presented for the first time as such. The firm henceforward was to be "Halifax and Son".

And full of smiling satisfaction (despite his many cares) was the father's look, when in the evening he stood in the midst of his children waiting for "Guy's visitors", as he pertinaciously called them—these "fine" people for whose entertainment our house had been these three days turned upside down; the sober old dining-room converted into a glittering ballroom, and the entrance hall a very "bower of bliss"—all green boughs and Chinese lanterns.

"John looks well to-night," said Ursula, coming in and sitting beside me, her eyes following mine to where he stood. And indeed a goodly group they all made, father and children. Ay, and their mother too. John did not neglect to tell her how lovely she was looking, when, catching sight of her a moment later, he came to her side.

She laughed at him, and declared she always intended to grow lovely in her old age. "I thought I ought to dress grandly, too, on Guy's birthday. Do you like my black velvet gown?"

"Very much. And the lace frill round your throat. Ah, you have put on that brooch at last, I see."

"Yes, but"—and she shook her head—"remember your promise."

"Phineas, this wife of mine is a vain woman. She knows her price is 'far above rubies'—or diamonds, either. No, Mrs. Halifax, do not be afraid; I shall give you no more jewels."

She did not need them. The love of her husband and family was her treasure.

Here a troop of the company arrived, and John left me to assume his duties as host.

No easy duty, as I soon perceived, for times were hard, and men's minds troubled. Everyone, except the youngsters, looked grave. This year, 1825, was the panic year. War having ceased, commerce, in its worst form, had started into sudden and unhealthy growth. Speculations of all kinds had sprung up like fungi, out of dead wood, flourished a little, and dropped away. Then came ruin, not of hundreds, but thousands, all ranks and classes. This year, this month in the year, the breaking of many established firms, especially bankers, told that the universal crash had begun.

It was felt even in our retired country neighbourhood, and among our invited guests this night, both gentle and simple, were townsfolk and country people, dissenters and church people, professional men and men of business. Most men would have feared to mix such heterogeneous elements. But John dared to do it—and did it. But though his own personal influence was respected—and these diverse people, coming together in his house, met as friends—the cloud which seemed to hang over all at the present time was hard to disperse. They hit on all sorts of extraneous subjects, deliberately keeping aloof from the one which pressed on their minds.

Of course the talk fell on our neighbours—country talk

always does. I heard Sir Herbert Oldtower lamenting that Lord Luxmore had allowed the Hall to drop into such disgraceful decay.

"Older woods than mine by many a century—downright sacrilege! And the property being entailed—actual robbery of the heir. But, I understand, anybody may do anything with Lord Ravenel—he has degenerated into a mere selfish, cynical, idle voluptuary."

"Indeed you are mistaken, Sir Herbert," cried Mr. Jessop of Norton Bury—a very honest fellow was Josiah Jessop. "No doubt he has his faults. But he banks with me—and I know his generosity to many poor Catholics. Cynical he may be; idle perhaps—most men of fashion are—but Lord Ravenel is not the least like his father—is he, Mr. Halifax?"

"I have not seen Lord Ravenel for many years." And John, reminded no doubt of the last day we had seen the young lord—so short a while before his darling's death—moved away, and went and talked to a girl both he and the mother liked above most young girls we knew—the pretty, sunny-faced Grace Oldtower.

Dancing began. In spite of my Quaker education—or perhaps because of it—I delighted to see dancing. But I soon noticed that the hero of the evening was not among the dancers.

"Where is Guy?" I heard his mother ask. "Have you seen him anywhere, Miss Silver?"

Miss Silver, who sat playing tunes—she had declined dancing—turned, colouring visibly. "Yes, I have seen him; he is in the study."

"Would you be so kind as to fetch him?"

The governess rose and crossed the room, with a stately walk—statelier than usual. Her silk gown, and some changes which Maud had insisted upon putting in her dark hair, made an astonishing change in her. I could not help remarking on it to Mrs. Halifax, adding that I had not realized before how very young she was.

"Yes, indeed, she looks well. John says her features are

fine; but for my part, I don't care for your statuesque faces. I like colour—expression. Poor Miss Silver! I wish——”

But at this moment Guy entered, and led Grace Oldtower into the dancing.

“Guy dances lazily to-night,” I observed; “he is rather pale too, I fancy.”

“Tired probably. He was out far too long on the ice to-day with Maud and Miss Silver.”

At the end of the dance Guy and his partner sat down beside us. His mother noticed that he was still very pale, and the lad owned to being in some pain. He had twisted his foot in helping Maud and Miss Silver across the ice; but it was a mere trifle—not worth mentioning.

It passed over with one or two anxious inquiries on the mother's part, and some evident concern on the part of Grace Oldtower. Then Sir Herbert appeared to lead Mrs. Halifax in to supper. Guy limped along with pretty Grace on his arm, and all the guests, just enough to fill our longest table—which had been set up in John's study—came thronging round in a burst of mirthfulness; for the general influence of social pleasantness had for the time being dispelled the gloom. The master of the feast looked down two long lines of happy faces, to where, at the foot of the table, the mother and mistress sat. Only Mr. Jessop, the old banker, seemed, I noticed, unable to throw off his unusual gravity.

At length, Sir Herbert, with a loud premise of his right as the oldest friend of our family, tried to obtain silence for the customary speech, prefatory to the customary toast of “Health and prosperity to the heir of Beechwood.”

There was great applause and filling of glasses; great smiling and whispering; everybody glancing at poor Guy, who turned red and white, evidently wishing himself a hundred miles off. In the confusion, I felt my sleeve touched, and saw leaning towards me, hidden by Maud's laughing happy face, the old banker. He held in his hand a newspaper that some careless servant had brought in a minute or two before, fresh from the night mail, and wet with sleet and snow.

"Mr. Fletcher—it is the London *Gazette*. Mr. Halifax gets it three hours before any of us. May I open it? Mrs. Halifax would excuse me, eh?"

Of course she would. Especially if she had seen the old man's look, as his trembling fingers tried to unfold the sheet without a single rustle betraying his surreptitious curiosity. Sir Herbert rose, cleared his throat, and began his speech. But he had hardly spoken a dozen words, before someone called out:

"Mr. Jessop! Look at Mr. Jessop!"

The old man had suddenly sunk back, with a sort of choking groan. His cheek was the colour of ashes. But when he saw everyone looking at him, he tried desperately to recover himself.

"'Tis nothing. Nothing of the slightest moment. Pray continue, Sir Herbert."

But from his agitation, and the sight of the paper which he was still clutching tightly, it was evident that there was some bad news. Edwin leaned over, and saw the fatal page—the fatal column—known only too well.

"W——'s have stopped payment."

W——'s was a great London house, the favourite banking-house of our country, with which many provincial banks, and Jessop's especially, were widely connected, and would be no one knew how widely involved.

A hush of suspense fell over the company; our guests, one and all, sat looking at each other in breathless fear, suspicion, or assured dismay. For as everyone was aware, there was not a single household in that merry little company upon whom, near or remote, the blow would not fall—except ours. No polite disguise could gloss over the general consternation.

"There will be a run on Jessop's Bank to-morrow," I heard one person saying, glancing to where the poor old banker sat, with a vacant, stupefied smile.

"A run? I suppose so," said another. "Then it will be *Sauve qui peut*, and the devil take the hindmost."

"What say you to all this, Mr. Halifax?"

John had been sitting quite still. Now he looked up—to see, instead of those two lines of happy faces—faces angry, sullen, or miserable, all of which, with a vague distrust, seemed instinctively turned on him.

“Mr. Halifax,” said the baronet, politely striving to break the pregnant silence, “this is an unpleasant breaking in upon your kindly hospitalities. I fear we shall all have to make up our minds to some loss. Let me hope that yours will be trifling.”

John made no answer.

“Perhaps—though I can hardly hope for anything so fortunate—perhaps this failure will not affect you at all.”

He waited—as did many others, for Mr. Halifax’s reply, which was long in coming. However, since all seemed to expect it, it did come at last—but grave and sad, as if it were the announcement of some great misfortune.

“No, Sir Herbert, it will not affect me at all.”

Sir Herbert, and not he alone, looked surprised—uneasily surprised. Some mutters there were of “congratulation”. There arose a troubled murmur of talking.

“My friends,” said the baronet, “I think we are forgetting our courtesy. Allow me to give you without any more delay—the toast I was about to propose—‘Health, long life and happiness to Mr. Guy Halifax’.”

And so poor Guy’s birthday toast was drunk; almost in silence; and the few words he said in acknowledgment were scarcely heard. Everyone rose from the table, and the festivities were over.

One by one our guests began to make excuses. The brusque, resentful adieux of many showed but too obviously how cruelly, even resentfully, they felt the inequalities of fortune.

John was left, a very pariah of prosperity, by his own hearth, quite alone.

CHAPTER XVI

It was the following Monday morning—market day (Guy's birthday had fallen on a Saturday), and a great, eager, but doggedly-quiet crowd, had collected before the bank at Norton Bury. All were silently intent on their own business; all eyes were fixed on that fast-bolted red-baize door—for each had his or her individual interests to fight for, and cared not a straw for that of anyone else.

The Abbey clock struck three-quarters. Then (for in fifteen minutes—at ten o'clock—the bank was due to open) there was a slight stirring, a rustling here and there of paper, as someone drew out and examined his bank notes; openly, with small fear of theft—they were not worth stealing.

John and I, a little way off, stood looking on. We had driven over from Norton Bury at an unusually early hour. He did not exactly tell me why, but it was not difficult to guess. Such a man as he could not but feel deeply for that silent, respectable, patient crowd, so many of which were threatened with the loss of all their savings. I remarked to John how big a proportion of them were women.

"Yes, I was sure it would be so. Jessop's bank has such a number of small depositors, and issues so many small notes. He cannot cash above half of them without some notice. If there comes a run, he may have to stop payment this very day; and then how wide the misery would spread among the poor, God knows."

The anxious minutes crept by, till the hour hand of the great Abbey clock touched one heel of the great striding X—glided on to another—and the ten strokes fell leisurely and regularly upon the clear frosty air. But the bank door remained closed—not a rattle at the bolts, not a clerk's face peering out above the blind. The house was as shut up and desolate as if it were empty.

Five whole minutes did that poor, patient crowd wait on the pavement. Then a murmur arose. One or two men hammered on the door; some frightened women, jostled in the press, began to scream.

John could bear it no longer. "Come along with me," he said hurriedly. "I must see Jessop—we can get in at the garden door."

This was a little gate round the corner of the street. We passed through it and into that same room where I had pleaded with Ursula March so many years ago, when Dr. Jessop had been the occupier of the house. It was no summer-parlour now—its atmosphere was totally changed. It was a dull, dusty room, and in it, before a low fire, sat Josiah Jessop—with breakfast untasted, his elbows on his knees, the picture of despair.

"Mr. Jessop, my good friend!"

"No, I haven't a friend in the world, or shall not have an hour hence. Oh! it's you, Mr. Halifax? You have not an account to close. You do not hold any notes of mine?"

John put his hand on the old man's shoulder, and repeated that he only came as a friend. "Not the first 'friend' I have received this morning. I knew I should be early honoured with visitors;" and the banker attempted a dreary smile. "Sir Herbert and half a dozen more are waiting for me upstairs. The biggest fish must have the first bite—eh, you know?"

"I know," said John gloomily.

"Hark! those people outside will hammer my door down! Speak to them, Mr. Halifax—tell them that—I was always an honest man. Tell them that if they will only give me time—Heaven help me! do they want to tear me to pieces?"

John went out for a few moments; then came back and sat down beside the quivering old man.

"Compose yourself! Tell me, if you have no objection, exactly how your affairs stand."

With a gasp of thankfulness, the banker obeyed. Great as his loss was by W——'s failure, it was not absolute ruin to

him. Indeed, he was at this moment perfectly solvent. If only his customers would give him time to call on the bank's debtors he could pay them all.

"But they will not. There will be a run on the bank, and then it's all over with me. It's a hard case, Mr. Halifax, solvent as I am—ready and able to pay every farthing—if only I had a week. Hush! they are at that door again. Mr. Halifax, for God's sake quiet them."

"I will; only tell me first what sum, added to the cash you have available, would keep the bank open."

At once guided and calmed, the old man's business faculties seemed to return. He began to calculate, and soon stated the sum he needed; I think it was three or four thousand pounds.

"Very well; I have thought of a plan. But first—those poor fellows outside. Thank heaven I am a rich man, and everybody knows it. Phineas, that inkstand, please."

He sat down and wrote, and soon a notice—signed by Josiah Jessop, and afterwards by himself—to the effect that the bank would open "without fail" at one o'clock, was given to the astonished clerk to be posted on the window.

A responsive cheer showed how readily those outside had caught at this gleam of hope.

The banker breathed freer; but his respite was short: an imperative message came from the gentlemen above, desiring his presence. John immediately offered to go in his stead. The banker overwhelmed him with gratitude.

"Nay, that ought to be my word, standing in this house and remembering. Come, Mr. Jessop, leave the matter to me. Believe me, it is not only a pleasure, but a duty."

The old man melted into senile tears.

I do not know how John managed the provincial magnates, but half an hour later he came out of their presence with a cheerful countenance; told me he was going over to Coltham. Would I wait his return?

"All is settled?" I asked.

"Will be soon, I trust. I can't stay to tell you more now. Good-bye."

I am no man of business, and could assist in nothing. So I thought the best I could do was to pass the time wandering up and down the familiar garden. But as it neared one o'clock, I began to feel rather anxious. I went into the deserted office; and there, none forbidding, ensconced myself behind the sheltering black blinds.

The honest, patient, weary crowd had scarcely moved. On its extremest verge, waiting in a curricule, was a gentleman who seemed observing it with a lazy curiosity. He was dressed, I noticed, in the height of the mode, combined with a novel and eccentric fashion, which had lately been set by that extraordinary young nobleman—Lord Byron. His face, that of a man of about thirty—I fancied I had seen before somewhere, but could not recall where—was delicate. He sat in the carriage, wrapped in furs—as if he thought there was nothing in life worth living for.

But the gentleman soon retired from my observation under his furs; for the sky had gloomed over, and snow began to fall. Those on the pavement shook it drearily off, and kept turning to the Abbey clock. A quarter to one! How much longer would their patience last?

At length some determined hand battered at the door. I fancied I heard a clerk speaking out of a first-floor window. "Gentlemen"—how tremblingly polite the voice was—"Gentlemen, in five minutes—positively five minutes—the bank will——"

The rest of the speech was drowned and lost. Dashing round the street corner, the horses all in foam, came our Beechwood carriage. Mr. Halifax leaped out.

Well might the crowd divide for him—well might they cheer him. For he carried a great canvas bag, containing the consolation—perhaps the life—of hundreds.

The bank door flew open like magic. The crowd came pushing in; but when John called out to them, "Good people, pray let me pass!" they yielded and suffered him to go in first. He went right up to the desk behind which, flanked by a tolerable array of similar bags—but nevertheless waiting in

mortal fear, and as white as his own neckcloth—the old banker stood.

“Mr. Jessop,” John said, in a loud, distinct voice, that all might hear him, “I have the pleasure to open an account with you. I feel satisfied that in these dangerous times no credit is more safe than yours. Allow me to pay in to-day the sum of five thousand pounds.”

“Five thousand pounds!”

The rumour of it was repeated from mouth to mouth. In a small provincial bank such a sum seemed unlimited. It gave universal confidence. Many who had been scrambling, almost fighting, to reach the counter and receive gold for their notes, put them again into their pockets, uncashed. Others, chiefly women, got them cashed with a trembling hand—nay, with tears of joy. A few who had come to close accounts changed their minds and even paid money in. All were satisfied—the run on the bank ceased.

Mr. Halifax stood aside looking on. After the first murmur of surprise and pleasure no one seemed to take any notice of him. Only one old widow woman, as she slipped three bright guineas under the lid of her market-basket, dropped him a curtsy in passing.

“It’s your doing, Mr. Halifax. May the Lord reward you, sir.”

“Thank you,” he said, and shook her by the hand. I thought to myself, watching the many that came and went unmindful, “only this Samaritan”.

No—one person more, standing by, addressed him by name. “This is indeed your doing, and an act of benevolence which I believe no man alive would have done except Mr. Halifax.” I turned and saw that it was the world-weary young man of fashion I had observed sitting in the curricule. He held out a friendly hand. “I see you do not remember me. My name is Ravenel.”

“Lord Ravenel!”

John uttered this exclamation—and no more. I saw that this sudden meeting had brought back, with cruel poignance,

the memory of their last meeting—in Muriel's presence. However, this feeling shortly passed away; and we three began to converse together.

While he talked, something of the old "Anselmo" came back into Lord Ravenel's face, especially when John asked him if he would return with us to Enderley.

"Enderley—how strange the word sounds. Yet I should like to see the place again. Poor old Enderley! Yes, I think I will go back with you. But first I must speak to Mr. Jessop here."

It was about some poor Catholic families, who, as we had already learnt, had long been his pensioners.

"You are a Catholic still, then?" I asked. "We heard the contrary."

"Did you? Oh, of course. One hears such wonderful things. Probably you have heard that I have been to the Holy Land and turned Jew—called at Constantinople, and come back Mohammedan."

"But you are still of your old faith?" John said. "Still a sincere Catholic?"

"If you take Catholic in its original sense, certainly. I am a Universalist. I believe in everything and nothing. Let us change the subject."

We drove home in the gathering darkness. Lord Ravenel, muffled up in his furs, complained bitterly of the cold.

"Yes, the winter is setting in sharply," John replied, as he reined in his horses at the turnpike gate. "This will be a hard Christmas for many."

"Ay, indeed, sir," said the gatekeeper, touching his hat. "If I might make so bold, sir," he added in a mysterious whisper—"it's a dark night, and the road's lonely."

"Thank you, my friend, I am aware of that." But as John drove on across the bleak deserted country, he was very silent.

All of a sudden the horses were pulled up. Three or four ill-looking figures had started out of a ditch-bank, and caught hold of the reins.

"Hulloa there! What do you want?"

"Money."

"Let go my horses! They're spirited beasts. You'll get trampled on."

"Who cares?"

We were miles away from any house—on a bleak desolate moor. Our position was one of great danger; but John himself did not seem to recognize it. He stood upright on the box seat, the whip in his hand.

"Get away, you fellows, or I must drive over you."

"Thee'd better!" With a yell, one of the men leaped up and clung to the neck of the plunging mare—then was dashed to the ground beneath its feet. The poor wretch uttered one groan and no more. John sprang from the carriage, caught the mare's head, and backed her.

"Hold off!—the poor fellow is killed, or may be in a minute. Hold off, I say!"

If ever these men, planning perhaps their first ill-deed, were struck dumb with astonishment, it was to see the gentleman they had intended to rob, come down into the midst of them, lift up their injured comrade, rub snow in his face, and chafe his hands. But all was in vain. The blood trickled down from a wound in his temples—the head, with its open mouth drooping, fell back on John's knee.

"He is quite dead."

The others gathered round in silence, watching Mr. Halifax, as he still knelt, mournfully regarding the dead man's face in the light of the carriage lamps.

"I think I know him. Where does his wife live?"

Someone pointed across the moor to a light, faint as a glow-worm. "Take the rug out of my carriage—wrap him in it." The order was obeyed at once. "Now carry him home. I will follow presently."

"Surely not," expostulated Lord Ravenel, who had got out of the carriage and stood, shivering and much shocked, beside Mr. Halifax. "You would not put yourself into the power of these scoundrels? What brutes they are—the lower orders."

"Not altogether—when you know them. Phineas, will you drive Lord Ravenel on to Beechwood?"

"Excuse me—certainly not," said Lord Ravenel, with dignity. "We will stay and see the result of the affair. What a singular man Mr. Halifax is and always was!" he added thoughtfully, as returning to his seat he muffled himself up again. He lay back and relapsed into silence.

Soon, following the track of those black figures across the snow, we drove on to a cluster of peat huts, alongside the moorland road. John went in, without saying a word. To my surprise Lord Ravenel presently followed him. I was left with the reins in my hands, and two or three of those ill-visaged men hovered about the carriage; but no one attempted to do me any harm. Nay, when John reappeared, after a lapse of some minutes, one of them civilly picked up the whip and put it into his hands.

"Thank you. Now, my men, tell me what did you want with me just now?"

"Money," cried one. "Work," shouted another.

"And a likely way you went about to get it. Stopping me on a lonely road, just like common robbers. I did not think any Enderley men could be so cowardly."

"We bean't cowards," was the surly answer. "Thee carries pistols, Mr. Halifax."

"You forced me to do it. My life is just as precious to my wife and children as—as that poor fellow's to his." John stopped. "God help us, my men! it's a hard world for us all sometimes. Why did you not know me better? Why did you not come to my house and ask honestly for a dinner and half-a-crown? You should have had both any day."

"Thank'ee, sir," was the general cry. "And, sir," begged one old man. "You'll hush up the crowner's 'quest. You won't put us in jail for taking to the road?"

"No; unless you attack me again. But I am not afraid—I'll trust you. Look here!" He took his pistol out of his pocket, cocked it, and fired its two barrels harmlessly into the air.

"Now, good night; and if ever I carry firearms again, it will be your fault, not mine."

So saying he' mounted the box-seat, and in somewhat melancholy silence, we drove across the snowy, starlit moors to Beechwood.

CHAPTER XVII

No family was ever more united than ours had always been. Between Guy and Edwin—the one so gay and charming, the other so full of serious purpose—there *had* developed of late years a certain lack of accord; but though we had regretted this, we had had no reason to regard their differences very gravely.

But now, in the weeks that followed Guy's twenty-first birthday, there arose a situation which brought the two brothers into actual hostility. Both fell in love with Miss Silver, Maud's handsome young governess—and it was not the attractive Guy whom she favoured, but his less spectacular brother. Angry words passed between the two lads; actual blows were exchanged.

Guy was the aggressor; but the position in which he found himself was one which was very hard for him to endure. He had not known, when he first began to pay attentions to Louise Silver, that a secret understanding between her and Edwin already existed. He had mistaken the sisterly affection which the girl showed him for love of a very different kind. He had proposed to her, confident—ay, too confident—that his proposal would be accepted. And his resentment against his brother when the real state of affairs became known to him was great indeed.

Poor Guy! Life, in truth, had treated him too well. It had not accustomed him to bear disappointment. It had certainly not prepared him for any disappointment so grievous as this.

To remain at Beechwood, a daily witness of Edwin's "triumph" was impossible for him. He therefore resolved to leave home, and go abroad.

This parting—in such tragic circumstances—with her eldest and best-beloved son was a cruel blow for the mother.

And the knowledge that the happiness of her second son could only be secured by Guy's desolation made it the more terrible. She had never doubted that her boy would remain at Enderley to become his father's right-hand. She bowed to the inevitable, and saw him go bravely. But the sorrow caused by this break in her family remained. It was one from which she never really recovered.

Two years rolled over Beechwood—two uneventful years. The last of the children ceased to be a child; and we prepared for that great event in all family history, the first marriage in the family. It was to be celebrated very quietly, as Edwin and Louise Silver both desired. Time had healed over many a pang, and taught many a soothing lesson; Ursula had learned to conquer her natural bitterness, and to accept with affection, as her future daughter-in-law, the girl who had been the unwitting cause of strife between her sons; still it could not be expected that this marriage should cause her no pain.

But the family wound was closing; Guy still remained abroad; his going had produced the happy result intended. Month after month his letters came, each more hopeful than the last, each bringing balm to the mother's heart. Little Maud even fancied that Guy ought to come home to "our wedding"; but then she had never been told the whole of past circumstances. Yet so mercifully had time smoothed down all things that it sometimes appeared to us elders as if those days of bitterness which had preceded Guy's departure were a mere dream. Only that Ursula's hair had begun to turn from brown to grey; and John first mentioned, so cursorily that I cannot even now remember when or where, that slight pain, almost too slight to complain of, which had warned him, in climbing Enderley Hill, that he could not climb so fast as when he was young. And I returned his smile, telling him that we were evidently growing old men; and must soon set our faces to descend the hill of life. I had then no doubt as to which of us would reach the bottom first.

Yet I was glad to have safely passed my first half century of

life—glad to have seen many of John's cares laid to rest. He had lived down all slander, as he had said he would. Far and near had travelled the story of the manner in which he had saved Jessop's bank; far and near among the poor had been whispered the tale of a gentleman who had been attacked on the high road, and whose only attempt at bringing the robbers to justice was to help the widow off one, and send the others safely out of the country at his own expense. There were still, no doubt, those who envied him, and whispered against him in secret; but these had no longer the power to trouble him. His high character was too firmly established; he was too widely respected and loved.

Two years, I have said, had passed since the eldest son had gone away; and, on the particular morning of which I am thinking, Ursula was remarkably gay. She had just received some letters from Guy, together with a lovely present, for which he said he had ransacked all the *magasins de modes* in Paris—a white embroidered shawl. Lord Ravenel had been the bearer of it. This was not the first time by many that he had brought us news of our Guy, and thereby made himself welcome at Beechwood—more welcome than he would otherwise have been; for his manner of life was so different from ours. Not that Lord Ravenel could be accused of any likeness to his father; but blood is blood, and education and habits are not to be easily overcome. The boys laughed at him for his aristocratic languid ways; Maud teased him for his mild cynicism and the little interest he seemed to take in anything; while the mother herself was somewhat restless about his frequent calls on us, wondering what possible good his acquaintance could do to us, or ours to him, seeing that we were in totally different spheres. But John himself was invariably kind, nay, tender over him—we all guessed why.

To-day when he had taken a seat amongst us, Mrs. Halifax, in the casual civil inquiry which was all the old earl ever won in our house, asked after the health of Lord Luxmore.

"He is still at Compiègne," replied Lord Ravenel. "Does

not Guy mention him? *He takes the greatest pleasure in Guy's society.*"

By her start, I saw that this was new and most unwelcome tidings to Guy's mother. No wonder. Any mother in England would have shrunk from the thought that her best beloved son—especially a young man of Guy's temperament—was mixing with the worthless people who surrounded the debauched and notorious old Earl.

"My son did not mention it. He has been too occupied in business matters to write home frequently since he reached Paris. However, his stay there is limited." She said no more than this, of course, to Lord Luxmore's son, but her disquiet was sufficiently apparent.

"It was I who brought your son to Compiègne—where he is a universal favourite for his wit and liveliness," continued Lord Ravenel. "I know no one who is a more pleasant companion than Guy."

Guy's mother bowed—coldly; and the subject was dropped. And so occupied were we at this time with the preparations for Edwin's wedding, it was not until the day after that I recalled what Lord Ravenel had said about Guy's association with Lord Luxmore's set. It was then brought back to my mind by the mother's anxious face, as she gave me a letter to post.

"Post it yourself, will you, Phineas? I would not have it miscarry, on any account."

No; for I saw it was to her son in Paris.

"It will be the last letter I need to write," she added, again lingering over it, to be certain that the address was correctly written. "My boy is coming home."

"Guy coming home! To the marriage?"

"No, but immediately after. He is quite himself now. He longs to come home."

"And his mother?"

His mother could not speak. Like light to her eyes, like life to her heart, was the thought of Guy's coming home. She looked suddenly ten years younger.

John also was eager to have his son with him again, though his pleasure was not unmixed with anxiety.

The day fixed for Edwin's wedding came, bright and sunny. None could have desired a brighter marriage morning. Sunshine out of doors—sunshine on all the faces within; only family faces—for no other guests had been invited; the bride and bridegroom themselves wished it so, and there was nothing John disliked more than a show wedding. Therefore it was with some surprise that while they were all upstairs adorning themselves for church, Maud and I, standing at the hall door, saw Lord Ravenel's travelling carriage drive up to it; and Lord Ravenel himself, with a quicker and more decided gesture than was natural to him, sprang out. Ravenel who had gone back to Paris not a week before!

Maud ran into the porch, startling him much apparently; for indeed she was a sweet vision of youth, happiness, and grace in her pretty bridesmaid's dress.

"Is this the wedding morning? I did not know. I have but this moment returned from France. I will come back again to-morrow," and he seemed eager to escape back to his carriage.

This action relieved me from a vague apprehension of ill-tidings. "Have you seen Guy?" I asked.

"No."

"We thought for a moment it might be Guy come home," Maud cried. "We are expecting him. Have you heard from him since we saw you? Is he well?"

"I believe so."

I thought the answer was brief; but then he was looking intently upon Guy's sister, who held his hands in her childish affectionate way. For her Lord Ravenel, reminded perhaps of her sister, had always shown a particular fondness, and she had not yet relinquished the privilege of being his "pet". When therefore, he hesitatingly proposed going, the young lady would not hear of it. She took the unexpected guest into the study, left him there with her father, explained to her

mother all about his arrival and his having missed seeing Guy—appearing entirely delighted.

We settled in the drawing-room, a happy group waiting for the father to join us, before going to the church.

“John, is that you? How softly you came in! And Lord Ravenel! He knows we are glad to see him. Shall we make him one of our own family for the time being, and take him to see Edwin married?”

Lord Ravenel bowed again. The mother said something about his unexpected arrival.

“He came on business,” John answered quickly, and Ursula made no more inquiries.

She stood talking with Lord Ravenel, a picture of matronly grace and calm content, as charming as the handsome, happy bride herself.

I was looking at her when John called me aside. I followed him into the study.

“Shut the door.”

By his tone and look I knew in a moment that something had happened.

“Yes. I’ll tell you presently—if there’s time.”

While he was speaking some violent pain—physical or mental, or both—seemed to seize him. I had my hand on the door to call Ursula, but he held me fast.

“Call no one. I am used to it. Water!”

He drank a glassful, breathed heavily once or twice, and gradually recovered himself. The colour had scarcely returned to his face when we heard little Maud run laughing through the hall.

“Father, where are you? We are waiting for you.”

“I will come in two minutes, my child.”

Having said this, in his own natural voice, he closed the door again, and spoke to me rapidly.

“Phineas, I want you to stay away from church; make some excuse. Write a letter for me to this address in Paris. Say—Guy Halifax’s father will be there without fail, within a week, to answer all demands.”

"All demands," I echoed, bewildered.

He repeated the sentence word for word. "Can you remember it? Literally mind. And post it at once, before we return from church."

Here the mother's call was heard. "John, are you coming?"

"In a moment, love." Then to me, in an urgent whisper: "You understand, Phineas? And you will be careful—very careful? *She must not know*—not till to-night."

"One word. Guy is alive and well?"

"Yes—yes."

"Thank God!" For whatever ill-tidings Lord Ravenel had brought—and it was plain now that he had done so—I could not conjure up any grief as bitter as the boy dying.

But Guy's father was gone while I spoke; I too rejoined the rest, made my excuses, and answered all objections. I watched the simple marriage procession leave the house; then, returning to the study, I wrote the letter and sent it off.

But my anxiety about Guy was not at present as great as that which I felt for his father. What was the cause of the sudden spasm which had seized him, and drained all colour from his face? Was it illness? But then I remembered his firm gait as he had set off with Louise up the garden. No, it must have been a shock of some kind. He was not one to keep a secret from those who loved him. He could not be seriously ill, or we should have known it.

Thus I pondered, until I heard the church bells ring out merrily. The marriage was over.

I was just in time to meet them at the front gate, which they entered—Edwin and his wife—through a line of smiling faces—for Enderley would not be defrauded of its welcome—all the village escorted the young couple in triumph home.

John stood on the hall steps while the young folk passed in—in a few words thanked his people, and bade them to the general rejoicing. They, uproarious, answered in loud hurrahs, and one energetic voice cried out:

"One more cheer for Master Guy!"

Guy's mother turned, delighted—her eyes shining with proud tears.

"John—thank them; tell them Guy will thank them himself to-morrow."

The master thanked them; but either he did not explain, or the honest rude voices drowned all mention of the latter fact—that Guy would be home to-morrow.

All this while, and at the marriage breakfast likewise, John kept the same calm demeanour. Once only, when the rest were all gathered round the bride and bridegroom, he said to me:

"Phineas, is it done?"

"Is what done?" asked Ursula, suddenly passing.

"A letter I asked him to write for me this morning."

"A letter of business I suppose," she asked, but rather anxiously—for John was incapable of hypocrisy, and his voice had sounded grave.

"Partly on business. I will tell you about it this evening."

She looked reassured. "Just as you like. You know I am not curious." But passing on, she turned back. "John, if it was anything important to be done—anything that I ought to know at once, you would not keep me in ignorance?"

"No—my dearest! No!"

Then what had happened must be something in which no help availed—something he wished rightly to keep back for a few hours, so as not to mar the happiness of the wedding day.

So he sat at the marriage table; he drank the marriage health; he gave them both a marriage blessing. Finally he sent them away, smiling and sorrowful—as is the bounden duty of young married couples to depart.

"It reminds me of Guy's leaving," said the mother, hastily brushing back the tears that would spring and roll down her smiling face, as she watched them go. "John, do you think it possible that Guy may be home to-night?"

John answered emphatically, but very softly, "No."

"Why not? My letter would reach him in full time. Lord Ravenel has been to Paris and back since then. But"—turning

full on the young nobleman—"I think you said that you had not seen Guy? Did you hear anything of him?"

"I—Mrs. Halifax——" Exceedingly distressed, almost beyond his power of self-restraint, the young man looked appealingly at John, who replied for him.

"Lord Ravenel brought me a letter from Guy this morning."

"A letter from Guy—and you never told me. How very strange."

Still she seemed only to think it strange. Some difficulty or folly perhaps. With the instinct of concealment—the mother's instinct—she asked no more questions before Lord Ravenel. John gently took her arm, and she suffered him to bring her into the study.

"Now—the letter, please. Children, go away; I want to speak to your father. The letter, John?"

Her hand, which she held out, shook much. She tried to unfold the paper—stopped, and looked up piteously.

"It is not to tell me that he is not coming home? I can bear anything—but he *must* come!"

John only answered "Read"—and firmly took hold of her hand while she read—as we hold the hand of one undergoing great torture which no human love, however great, can alleviate.

The letter, which I saw afterwards, was thus:

"Dear Father and Mother—I have disgraced you all. I have been drunk in a gaming-house. A man insulted me—it was about my father—but you will hear—all the world will hear presently. I struck him—there was something in his hand, and—the man was hurt.

He may be dead by this time. I don't know.

I am away to America to-night. I shall never come home any more. God bless you all.—Guy Halifax.

P.S.—I got my mother's letter to-day. Mother—I was not in my right senses or I should not have done it. Mother, darling, forget me. Don't let me have broken your heart."

Alas he had broken it!

“Never to come home any more! Never any more!”

Nature refused to bear it; or rather nature mercifully helped her to bear it. When John took his wife in his arms she was insensible; and remained so, with intervals, for hours.

This was the end of Edwin's wedding day.

CHAPTER XVIII

THUS we learned that there are sorrows more bitter even than death.

The man Guy had struck was not one of Lord Luxmore's set—though it was through some of the earl's friends that Guy had fallen into his company. He was an Englishman, lately succeeded to a baronetcy and estate; his name—Sir Gerald Vermilye!—the same man whose defeat John had brought about at the Kingswell election.

As soon as Ursula recovered—though she still moved about the house more like a ghost than a living woman—John and Lord Ravenel went to Paris together. This was necessary not only to meet justice, but to track the boy—to whose destination we had no clue but the wide word—America.

John went away. Then there followed weeks of torpid gloom—during which we, living shut up in Beechwood, knew that our name—John's stainless, honourable name—was in everybody's mouth—parroted abroad in every society—canvassed in every newspaper. We tried—Walter and I—to do all in our power to comfort Ursula. But her chief solace at this period was pretty Grace Oldtower, whom we had once hoped would become Guy's wife.

"Come often," I heard her say to this girl, whom she was so fond of. They had sat talking the whole evening—idly and pensively; of little things around them, never once referring to things outside. "Come often, though the house is dull. Does it not feel strange with Mr. Halifax away?"

Ay, this was the change—stranger at first than anything that had befallen Guy. We missed him sorely. And I think—such are the workings of Providence—that his absence was good for Ursula—for it taught her that in losing Guy she

had not lost all her blessings. It showed her what, in the passion of her mother-love, she might have been tempted to forget—that beyond all loves is the love that was hers before any of her children were born.

So when the day of his return came, she put the house in order, dressed herself in her prettiest gown, and then waited, with a flush on her cheek like that of a young girl waiting for her lover, for the sound of the carriage wheels. As he sprang from the chaise, it was to find his wife standing at the door, and his home smiling for him its brightest welcome.

He looked pale, but not paler than might have been expected. The first shock of his heavy misfortune was over. He had paid all his son's debts; and he had as far as was possible, saved his good name. Better still, Sir Gerald Vermilye, after lying many days between life and death, had begun to regain his strength, and was now out of danger.

So the father took his old place, and looked round on the remnant of his children, grave indeed, but not weighed down by incurable suffering. Something, deeper even than the hard time he had passed through, seemed to have made his home more than ever dear to him. He sat that day in his arm-chair, never weary of noticing everything pleasant about him, of saying how pretty Beechwood looked, and how delicious it was to be at home. And perpetually, if any chance unlinked it, his hand would return to clasp Ursula's; the minute she left her place by his side his restless, "Love, where are you going?" would call her back again. And once, when the children were out of the room, and I, sitting in a dark corner, was probably thought absent likewise, I saw John take his wife's face between his two hands, and look in it—the fondest, most lingering, saddest look!—then fold her tightly to his breast.

"I must never be away from her again. Mine—for as long as I live—my wife, my Ursula."

She took it all naturally, as she had taken every expression

of his love these nine and twenty years. I left them standing heart to heart, as if nothing in the world would ever part them.

Next morning was as gay as any of our mornings used to be, for before breakfast, came Edwin and Louise (Edwin was now in charge of his father's Norton Bury business, and his home was the old town house in which John and Ursula had started *their* married life). And after breakfast, the father and mother and I walked up and down the garden, talking over the prospects of the young couple. Then the post came—but we had no need to watch for it now. It was only a letter from Lord Ravenel. John read it, and told us that he was coming back shortly. Maud, who was standing by, received the news with great delight. But I could see that this visit was not as welcome as usual to John and Ursula. Small wonder. It was hard for them to forget that it was he who had brought Guy into that worldly, loose-living circle at Compiègne which had been his downfall.

On Lord Ravenel's reappearance at Beechwood I was tempted to wish him away. He rode over daily from Luxmore Hall; he seemed eager and glad to come; but he never crossed the threshold but his presence brought a shadow over the parents' look.

Walter and Maud were as friendly to him as ever. But when he wanted to take them over to Luxmore one day to see some magnificent firs that were being cut, the father objected; he was clearly determined that the hospitalities between Luxmore and Beechwood should all be on the Beechwood side.

Lord Ravenel perceived this. "Luxmore is not Compiègne," he said to me with his dreary smile, half sad, half cynical; "Mr. Halifax might indulge me with the society of his children."

He lay on the grass, watching Maud's white dress flit about under the trees. "How tall that child has grown lately! She is about nineteen, I think?"

"Not seventeen till December," I replied.

"Ah, so young! Well, it is pleasant to be young! Dear little Maud!"

This was the last day of his visit to England; and perhaps he felt the cloud that had come over our intercourse with him, for that evening he lingered long over his leave-taking, as though it were unusually painful to him. He repeated many times how glad he should be to see Beechwood again; how all the world was "flat, stale, and unprofitable," except Beechwood.

John made no special answer; except that frank smile, not without a certain kindly satire, under which the young nobleman's Byronic affectations generally melted away like mists in the morning. He kindled up into warmth and manliness.

"I thank you, Mr. Halifax—I thank you heartily for all you and your household have been to me. I trust I shall enjoy your friendship for many years to come. And if in any way I might offer mine, or any small influence in the world——"

"Your influence is not small," John returned earnestly. "I know of no man who has wider opportunities than you have."

"But I have let them slip—for ever."

"No, not for ever. You are young still; you have half a lifetime before you."

"Have I? No, no, Mr. Halifax, who ever heard of a man beginning at seven-and-thirty?"

"Are you really seven-and-thirty?" asked Maud.

"Yes—yes, my girl. Is it so very old?"

He patted her on the shoulder, took her round young hand, gazed at it in melancholy tenderness, said his farewells to us all, and rode off.

But to our surprise he appeared again at Beechwood the very next day. He said he had delayed his journey to Paris, and gave no explanation of the delay. He joined us as usual at our mid-day dinner, and after dinner, still as usual, took a walk with me and Maud. It happened to be through the beech wood, almost the identical path that I remembered

taking years ago with John and Ursula, during our first stay at Rose Cottage. I remarked on the fact.

"You did not know father and mother when they were young, Lord Ravenel?" asked Maud.

"No, scarcely likely." And he smiled. "Oh yes—it might have been—I forget I am not a young man now. How old were Mr. and Mrs. Halifax when they married?"

"Father was twenty-one and mother eighteen—only a year older than I am," said Maud; and a moment later, catching sight of some wild flowers, she ran off to pluck them.

Lord Ravenel looked after her and sighed. "It is good to marry early, do you not think so, Mr. Fletcher?"

I told him that I thought those happiest who found their happiness early, but that it often came late also.

"I wonder," he said dreamily, "if I shall ever find it."

I asked him—it was by an irresistible impulse—why he had never married.

"Because I never found a woman I could believe in. Worse," he added bitterly, "I did not think there lived the woman who could be believed in."

We had now come out of the beech wood and were standing by the low churchyard wall; the sun glittered on the white headstone on which was inscribed "Muriel Joy Halifax."

Lord Ravenel leaned over the wall. After a while, he said gently:

"Do you know, I have thought sometimes that, had she lived, I could have loved—I might have married—that child!"

Maud now overtook us. Lord Ravenel turned to her. "I was saying how dearly I loved your sister Muriel."

"I know that," said Maud, and became grave at once. "I know you care for me because I am like my sister Muriel."

"If it were so, would you be glad or sorry?"

"Glad and proud too. But you said, or were going to say, something more. What was it?"

He hesitated long, then answered: "I will tell you another time."

Maud went away rather cross and dissatisfied, but evidently suspecting nothing. The frank innocence of childhood was still hers. For me, I began to feel seriously uneasy about Lord Ravenel. Though not vicious, like his father, his idle character was not one of which we could approve; and the disparity of age between himself and Maud—twenty years—could not be overlooked.

It was therefore with a mournful interest all day that I watched him follow the child about, gather her posies, and accommodate himself to those whims and fancies, of which, as the pet and the youngest, Mistress Maud had her full share.

When, at her usual hour of half-past nine, the little lady was summoned away to bed, he looked half resentful at the mother's interference. "Maud is not a child now, and this may be my last night——" He stopped, sensitively, at the involuntary foreboding.

"Your last night? Nonsense! you will come back again. You must—you shall!" said Maud decisively.

"I hope I may—I trust in heaven I may." He spoke low, holding her hand distantly and reverently, not attempting to kiss it, as he had always done in former farewells.

"Maud, remember me! However long I may be away, remember me!"

There were tears in Maud's eyes as she went out. And after she had left the room, Lord Ravenel sat silent a long, long time. "Mr. Halifax," he said at last, "may I have five minutes speech with you in your study?"

The five minutes extended to half an hour; and when John returned, he returned alone.

"John, is Lord Ravenel gone?" asked Ursula.

"Not yet."

"What could he have wanted to say to you?" Then, seeing how grieved and perplexed he looked: "O, husband, is it any new misfortune?"

John sat down beside her, cheering her with a smile. "No, love, nothing that fathers and mothers in general would consider as such. He has asked me for our Maud."

"For what? You mean—Oh, no! Impossible! Ridiculous—absolutely ridiculous! She is only a child!"

"Nevertheless Lord Ravenel wishes to marry our little Maud."

Mrs. Halifax repeated this to herself more than once before she could entertain it as a reality. When she did the first impression it made on her mind was, I could see, altogether pain. But before she could say more, Lord Ravenel himself re-entered the room, in a manner firmer and more stately than was usual with him. He stooped forward and kissed the hand of Maud's mother.

"Mr. Halifax has told you all, I believe?"

"He has."

"May I, then, with entire trust in you both, await my answer." He waited, patiently enough, with little apparent doubt as to what it would be. With all his natural humility, he was evidently conscious that it was not merely William Ravenel, but the heir to an ancient earldom who came wooing. Besides it was only the prior question of parental consent, not the vital point of Maud's preference. There was a long pause.

"It is difficult to give. I find my wife, like myself, had no idea of your feeling. The extreme suddenness——"

"Pardon me; my intention has not been sudden. It is the growth of many months—years I might almost say."

"We are the more grieved."

"Grieved?"

Lord Ravenel's extreme surprise startled him from the mere suitor into the lover; he glanced from one to the other in undisguised alarm. John hesitated; the mother said something about "the great difference between them".

"In age do you mean? I am aware of that," he answered, with some sadness. "But twenty years is not an insuperable

bar in marriage. And as for any other disparity—in fortune or rank——”

“I think, Lord Ravenel”—and the mother spoke with her ‘dignified’ air—“you know enough of my husband’s character and opinions to be assured how lightly he would hold such a disparity—if you allude to that which is supposed to exist between the son of the Earl of Luxmore and the daughter of John Halifax.”

The young nobleman coloured, as if with ingenuous shame at what he had been implying. “I am glad of it. Let me assure you there will be no impediments on my side of the family. My father has long wished me to marry. He knows well enough that I can marry whom I please—and shall marry for love only. Give me leave to win your little Maud.”

A dead silence, broken at last by Ursula. “I would you had asked me anything less impossible to give, Lord Ravenel,” she said gently, her eyes full of a sad kindness.

“Impossible! What do you mean, Mrs. Halifax? Is it that you think her too young for marriage? Be it so. I will wait—any time you choose to name—though my youth, alas! is slipping from me.”

“It is not that,” said John.

“What then?” asked Lord Ravenel, his pride rising. “Would it be so great a misfortune to your daughter if I made her Viscountess Ravenel, and in due course Countess of Luxmore?”

“I believe it would,” answered John sadly. “Do you not see yourself that the distance between you and us, between your family and mine, is as wide as the poles? Not in worldly things, but in things far deeper—personal things, which strike at the roots of love, home—nay, honour.”

“Ah, I understand you now. ‘The sins of the fathers shall be visited on the children’ as your Bible says—your Bible that I had half begun to believe in. Mr. Halifax, I will detain you no longer.”

John interrupted the young man’s departure.

"No, you do *not* understand me. I hold no man accountable for any errors, any shortcomings except his own."

"I am to conclude, then, that it is to myself that you refuse your daughter?"

"It is. Had I foreseen this, I would have placed the breadth of all England between you and my child. Not because you do not possess our warm interest—friendship: both will always be yours. But these are external ties. In marriage there must be perfect unity—one aim, one faith, one love. If not, it will be a mockery."

Lord Ravenel looked up amazed at this doctrine, then sat awhile, pondering drearily.

"Yes, you may be right," at last he said. "Your Maud is not for me, nor those like me. Between us and you is that 'great gulf fixed'. I am but what I was born to be."

"No, you were born to be, not only a nobleman, but a gentleman. You were born to use your position and influence for the betterment of your fellow men."

"But I have not done so? My life has been idle—wasted. And now it is too late."

"There is no such word as 'too late' in the wide world, Lord Ravenel—nay, not in the universe!"

As John spoke, with more excitement than was usual to him, a sudden spasm of colour flushed his face, then faded away, leaving him pallid to the very lips. He sat down hastily, in his frequent attitude, with the left arm pressed across his breast.

"Lord Ravenel"—his voice was faint, as though speech was painful to him—"forgive anything I have said that may hurt you. It would grieve me inexpressibly if we did not part friends."

"Part?"

"For a time, we must. I dare not risk further either your happiness or my child's."

"No, not hers. Guard it. I blame you not. The lovely, innocent child! God forbid that she should ever have a life like mine." With an effort he rose. "I must go now."

Crossing over to Mrs. Halifax, he thanked her, with much emotion, for her kindness.

"For your husband, I owe him more than kindness, as perhaps I may prove some day. If not, try to believe the best of me. Good-bye."

He shook hands with all three of us, without saying anything else; then the carriage rolled away, and we saw his face—that pale, gentle, melancholy face—no more.

It was only a month after his departure that our newspaper brought us the news that his father, Lord Luxmore, was dead. He had died heavily in debt—owing many thousands of pounds—for the dissolute old man had spent far beyond his income, and all his property had been entailed on his son. Hundreds were ruined—or would have been ruined—but for Lord Ravenel's generous action—of which we learned from Mr. Jessop, the Norton Bury banker.

Not a week before he died, the late earl, at his son's instigation, had cut off the entail, making the whole property saleable. And after his death, the new earl had sold it, and paid off all his father's creditors, thereby reducing himself almost to beggary. Of all his property, he had retained only the Enderley Mills. And this he had done so that, by remaining their owner, he could ensure that Mr. Halifax's interests were fully protected.

"He was with me last night," said old Mr. Jessop; "and he arranged it all then. I never saw a man so altered. He went over some matters with me—private charities, in which I have been his agent, you know—grave, clear-headed, business-like. My clerk himself could not have done better. Afterwards we sat and talked, and I tried—foolishly enough when the thing was done—to show him what a frantic act it was towards himself and his heirs. But he could not see it. He said cutting off the entail would harm nobody—for he did not intend ever to marry. The rent of the Enderley Mills—two hundred pounds a year—is all that remains to him of his income. But this, he said, would be sufficient for his needs. Poor fellow! Upon my word, Mr. Halifax, I

have never known any man to behave with such mad, unselfish generosity." And the old man wiped away the tears that had sprung to his eyes as he spoke.

"Is he with you still?" asked John, also deeply moved.

"No; he left this morning for Paris—to settle his father's affairs there. Afterwards, he said, his movements were quite uncertain. He bade me good-bye. 'I—I didn't like it, I assure you.'"

And once again the worthy old man had recourse to his pocket handkerchief.

The story was told everywhere, and Maud herself learned something of it. "Father," said she, coming up to him one day as he was walking in the garden, and putting her arm through his; "I—I wanted to speak to you."

"Speak on, little lady. You look pale, my child. Are you tired?"

"No, but my head aches. Father, I want you to explain to me, for I can't well understand all this they have been saying about Lord Ravenel."

John explained as simply and briefly as he could.

"I understand. Then, though he is now Earl of Luxmore, he is quite poor—poorer than any of us? And he has made himself poor to pay his father's debts, and keep other people from suffering?"

"Yes, my child."

"Is it not a very noble act, Father?"

"Very noble."

"I think it is the noblest act I ever heard of. When is he coming to Beechwood?"

Maud spoke quickly, with flushed cheeks, in the impetuous manner she inherited from her mother.

"I don't know," replied her father, after a long pause.

"How very strange! I thought he would come at once—to-night, probably, since he is back in England."

Her father told her that he had already returned to France.

"He ought to have come to us, Father. Why did he not?

Tell him to come back soon, please. Say how glad we should be to see him."

"My child—I cannot."

"What, not write to him—when he is poor and in trouble? That is not like you, Father." And Maud half loosed her arm.

Her father replaced the rebellious little hand back in its place again. I could see he was trying to decide how much he ought to tell her.

"I am sure there is something wrong," said Maud, seeing that he remained silent. "You do not care for Lord Ravenel, as you used to do."

"More, if possible."

"Then write to him. Say we want to see him—I want to see him. Ask him to come and stay a long time at Beechwood."

"I cannot, Maud. It would be impossible. I do not think he is likely to visit Beechwood for some time."

"How long? Six months? A year, perhaps?"

"It may be several years."

"Then I was right. Something has happened; you are not friends with him any longer. And he is poor—in trouble——O Father!"

She snatched her hand away, flashed on him reproachful eyes, and burst into tears. The very outburst, brief and thundery as a child's passion, gave consolation both to her father and me. When it lessened, John spoke.

"Now, has my little Maud ceased to be angry with her father?"

"I did not mean to be angry—only I was so startled—so grieved. Tell me what has happened, please, Father."

"I will tell you—so far as I can. The last night he was with us Lord Ravenel and I had some very painful conversation. After it, we both considered it advisable that he should not visit us again for the moment."

"Why not? Had you quarrelled?"

"No, Maud."

"Then, what was it?"

"My child, you must not ask, for indeed I cannot tell you."

Maud sprang up, her rebellious spirit flashing out again. "Not tell me—me, his pet—me, that cared for him more than any of you did. I think you ought to tell me, Father."

"You must allow me to decide that, if you please."

After this answer Maud paused, and said humbly: "Does anyone else know?"

"Your mother, and your Uncle Phineas, who happened to be present at the time. No one else knows, or shall know."

John spoke with that slight quivering and blueness of the lips which any mental excitement now produced in him. He sat down by his daughter's side, and took her hand.

"I knew this would grieve you. I kept it from you as long as I could. There are many sad things in life that we have to take on trust, and bear, and be patient with—yet never understand. I suppose we shall some day."

Something in his tone quietened her. She looked up at him, and crept closer to him—into his arms. "I did not mean to be naughty. I will try not to mind losing him. But I liked Lord Ravenel so much—and he was so fond of me."

"Child"—and her father himself could not help smiling at the simplicity of her speech—"it is often easiest to lose those we are fond of, because, in one sense, we can never really lose them. Nothing in this world, nor, I believe, in any other, can part those who truly and faithfully love."

I think he was hardly aware how much he was implying, at least not in its relation to her, or he would not have said it. And he would surely have noticed, as I did, how the word "love", which had not been mentioned before (it had been "liking", or "fond of" or some such roundabout phrase) made Maud start. She darted at both of us a look of keen inquiry, and then turned the colour of a July rose.

Alarmed, I tried to turn our conversation into other channels, lest, involuntarily, it might produce the very results which, though they would not have altered John's determination, would almost have broken his heart.

Maud did not revert to the subject, either then or later. But it seemed to me that from that day she was no longer a child. She became quieter, more serious, more ready to help her mother with the affairs of the house than she had ever been before.

The years went by, and still, to her parents' grief, she did not marry—though she had chances enough. She seemed to have no interest in the young men whom she met, either in our own home, or in the houses of our friends. She never mentioned Lord Ravenel's name. We knew not where he had gone. But was it possible, I wondered, that she still clung to those words of her father's: "Nothing in this world, nor, I believe, in any other, can part those who truly and faithfully love?"

There was also another we loved who remained unmarried—pretty Grace Oldtower, Guy's childhood friend and companion.

CHAPTER XIX

SEVEN years had passed since we had last seen Guy's merry face. We knew—for soon after his arrival in America, he had written, and had since kept us regularly informed of his doings—that he was making progress in the New World. But the mother, as the years crept on, continued to yearn for him with a longing that could not be told. The father, (as Edwin became engrossed in his own affairs, and Walter's undecided temperament kept him a boy long after boyhood,) often seemed to look round vaguely for an eldest son's strength to lean on, often said anxiously: "I wish Guy were at home."

Yet there was still no hint of his coming; better he never came at all than came against his will, or came to meet the least pain, the least shadow of disgrace. He was leading an active and useful life, earning an honourable name. His business interests were constantly increasing. He had lately taken another man into partnership. There was real friendship between them; they were doing well, perhaps might make, in a few years, one of those rapid fortunes which clever men do make in America, and did especially at that time.

He was also eager and earnest upon other and higher cares than mere business, entered warmly in his correspondence into his father's sympathy about the many social reform measures that were now occupying men's minds. A great number of comparative facts concerning the factory children in England and America, a mass of evidence used by Mr. Fowell Buxton in his arguments for the abolition of slavery, and many other things, originated in the impulsive activity of Mr. Guy Halifax, of Boston, U.S.—"our Guy".

"The lad is making a stir in the world," said his father one day, when we had read his last letter. "I shall not wonder, if,

when he comes home, a deputation from his native Norton Bury were to appear, requesting him to accept the honour of representing them in Parliament. He would suit them—at least, as regards canvassing the ladies—a great deal better than his old father—eh, love?”

Mrs. Halifax smiled, rather unwillingly, for her husband referred to a subject which had cost her some pain at the time. After the Reform Bill had been passed, many friends, knowing that Mr. Halifax's objection to entering the House had been the old system of franchise, had urged him most earnestly to stand as Parliamentary candidate for Norton Bury.

To everybody's surprise, and none more than our own—for we knew that to enter a reformed Parliament had long been his thought—he refused.

“No man can be more fitted than you to serve his country,” I said, trying to reason with him, “and no man is capable of giving his country such valuable service. It is almost your duty. Why have you changed your mind?”

“I have not changed my mind, but circumstances have changed my actions. As for duty—duty begins at home. Brother, we will not refer to it again.”

I saw that something in the matter pained him, and obeyed his wish.

Time went on placidly enough; Edwin's wife presented him with a son—and then with a daughter. The father and mother changed to grandfather and grandmother, and little Maud into Auntie Maud. Thus, after many storms, came this lull in our lives, a season of busy yet monotonous calm. A time of heavenly calm which, as I look back on it, grows more heavenly still. Happy, happy days!

The first break in our repose came early in the new year. To our consternation the usual Christmas letter from Guy had not arrived. Another month passed, and still no letter from him. Another—and yet another. Gradually, as his mother's cheek grew paler, and his father more anxious-eyed, more compulsorily cheerful, we gave up discussing publicly

the many excellent reasons why no word should have come from Guy—though we continued to write to him, as usual, by every mail.

It was May day, I remember—for we were down in the mill meadows with Louise and her little ones, going a-maying,—when there came in the American mail.

It brought a large packet—all our letters of this year sent back again, directed by a strange hand, to “John Halifax, Esquire, Beechwood”, with the annotation, “By Mr. Guy Halifax’s desire.”

Among the rest—though the sickening sight of the package had blinded the mother at first, so that her eye did not catch it—was one letter which explained, most satisfactorily, the reason why the letters were thus returned. It was a few lines from Guy himself, stating that unexpected good fortune had made him determine to come home at once. He was sailing by an American merchantman—the *Stars and Stripes*.

“Then he is on his way home! On his way home!” The mother’s hand was shaking as she held fast the letter. “O, John, he is coming home! When do you think we shall see him?”

At thought of that happy sight her bravery broke down, and she wept.

“The liners are only a month in sailing,” said John; “but this is a barque, most likely, which takes longer. Love, show me the date of the boy’s letter.”

She looked for it herself. It was in *January*.

The sudden fall from certainty to uncertainty—from joy to fear—was terrible indeed. We stood, mute and panic-stricken. John was the first to grasp the unspoken dread, and show that it was less than at first appeared.

“We ought to have had this letter two months ago. This proves how often delays occur. Do not let us be uneasy. Guy does not say when the ship was to sail; she may be on her voyage still. Cheer up, Mother; I will write to Lloyd’s and find out everything. Please God, you shall have that wandering, heedless boy back before long.”

John's letter to Lloyd's was written. Their answer arrived: the *Stars and Stripes* was an American vessel, probably of small tonnage and importance. They knew nothing of it.

After that day Mrs. Halifax's strength decayed. Not suddenly, scarcely perceptibly; not with any outward complaint. But, as the weeks went by, and our fear that Guy's ship had been lost grew to an unspoken certainty, her hair whitened, her long walks shortened, and gradually the greater part of the domestic surveillance fell into the hands of Maud. Her heart was breaking.

At length one day she was too tired to rise: and after that she took altogether to her bed. How we missed her about the house!—ay, changed as she had been. Her husband wandered about, ghostlike, from room to room—could not rest anywhere, or do anything. In the evening he carried her down to the sofa, as he used to carry Muriel—for she was too weak to walk herself.

"Phineas," she whispered one day, when I was putting a shawl over her feet—"Phineas, if anything happens to me, you will comfort John?"

Then first I began seriously to contemplate a possibility, hitherto as impossible and undreamed of as that the moon would drop from heaven. What would the house be without the mother?

Her children never suspected this, I saw. As for her husband, I could not understand him. Surely he saw what was coming. Yet he was as calm as if he saw it not. What was the explanation? Could it be that this love of his, which had clasped his wife so firmly, faithfully, and long, fearlessly clasped her still, by its own perfectness assured of its immortality?

It was already July. From January to July—six months! Our neighbours without—and there were many who felt for us—never asked now, "Is there any news of Mr. Guy?" Even Grace Oldtower—pretty still, but youthful no longer—only lifted her eyes inquiringly as she crossed our doorway,

and dropped them again with a hopeless sigh. She had loved us all, faithfully and well, for a great many years.

One night when Miss Oldtower had just gone home, after being with us all day, Maud and I were sitting in the study by ourselves (we generally sat there now—the father spent all his evenings upstairs), waiting for nothing, expecting nothing, when the maid, entering suddenly, startled us from our thoughts.

“Miss Halifax—there’s a gentleman asking to see you?”

“Anyone you know, is it?”

“No, miss.”

“Show the gentleman in.”

He stood already in the doorway—tall, brown, bearded. Maud just glanced at him, then rose, bending stiffly, after the manner of Miss Halifax of Beechwood.

“Will you be seated? My father——”

“Maud, don’t you know me? Where is my mother? I am Guy.”

Two days had passed since Guy’s return. He and his mother were together. She lay on a sofa in her dressing-room. He sat on a stool close beside her.

“You must get well now, Mother. Promise.” His mother smiled at him, and, lifting her thin hand, pressed his cheek.

“I think she looks stronger already—doesn’t she, Maud? I don’t ever remember her being ill in old times. O Mother, I will never leave you again—never!”

“No, my boy.”

“No, Guy, no.” John came in, and stood watching them both contentedly. “No, my son, you must never leave your mother.”

“I will not leave either of you, Father,” said Guy, with a reverent affection that must have gladdened the mother’s heart to the very core. Resigning his place by her, Guy took another facing them; and father and son began to talk of various matters concerning their home and business arrange-

ments. These eight years of separation seemed to have brought them very close together. It was already settled that he should join his father at Enderley Mills.

Guy was altered much certainly. It was natural—nay, right—that he should be. He had suffered much, a great deal more than he ever told us—at least, not till long after. He had written home by the *Stars and Stripes*—sailed later in another vessel—been cast away—picked up by an outward bound vessel—and finally landed in England, as poor as when he had left it—for all his fortune had gone down with the ship.

“Was your partner an Englishman?” asked Maud, when Guy’s present conversation with his father had ended. “You have never told us about him yet.”

Guy half smiled. “I will by-and-by. It’s a long story.”

But Maud, who had an eager interest in her brother’s adventures, began to press for immediate information. She was interrupted by a little tap at the door, and a little voice outside. Mr. Halifax went and opened the door, and a little girl of three stood there.

“Please me want to come in.”

“Come in, little one,” said John, “come in, and tell us what you want.”

“Me want to see Grannie and Uncle Guy.”

Guy started, but he still kept his seat. The mother took her grandchild in her feeble arms, and kissed her, saying softly:

“There—that is Uncle Guy. Go and speak to him.”

“Are you Uncle Guy? Why don’t you kiss me?”

“What is your name, my dear?” he asked, taking the little hand that was held out to him.

“Louise.”

Guy put back the curls, and gazed long and wistfully into the childish face, where the inherited beauty of the woman he had once loved was repeated line for line.

“Louise, you are very like——”

He stooped, and bending down, kissed her. In that kiss

vanished for ever the last shadow of his boyhood love. Not that he forgot it—God forbid that any good man should forget or be ashamed of his first love! But it and all its pain fled far away, back into the sacred eternities of dreamland. With it vanished also whatever vestiges there might have remained of hostility towards his brother. And when, a few minutes later, Edwin and his wife entered the room, and saw Guy for the first time since he returned, they met as true friends.

Soon after Edwin and Louise left us for an hour or two, and Guy, prompted by Maud, went on with the story of his life in America. His partner, he said, had come home with him, and like himself, had lost his all.

"It is harder for him than me," he went on. "He is older than I am. He knew nothing whatever of business when he offered himself as my clerk; since then he has worked like a slave. In a fever I had he nursed me; he has been to me these last three years the best, truest friend. He is the noblest fellow. Father, if you only knew——"

"Well, my son, let me know him. Write to him, and invite him to Beechwood. What is his name? You have never told us, you know."

Guy looked steadily at his father, seemed to waver, and then make up his mind.

"I did not tell because he wished me not—not till you understood him as well as I do. You knew him once yourself; but he has wisely dropped his title. Since he came over to me in America he has been known only as Mr. William Ravenel."

We all started. Maud's cheeks were suffused with a deep blush; then she turned deathly white. There was a long silence. I saw Maud looking anxiously at her father.

"Where is he?" asked John at last.

"At Norton Bury, Father. I told him I would either write or see him to-day. Nothing would induce him to come here, unless certain that you desired it."

Another silence. Then slowly: "I do desire it."

Maud covered her face with her hands. Guy started up with great joy. "Shall I write then?"

"I will write myself."

But John's hand shook so much that instead of his customary free, bold writing, he left only blots on the page. He leant back in his chair, and said faintly:

"I am getting an old man, I see. Guy, it was high time you came home."

"Let me write, Father. To-morrow will do just as well."

The father shook his head. "No—it must be done to-day." He rose and declared he would drive over to Norton Bury at once for our old friend.

Bidding good-bye to his wife—he never by any chance quitted her for an hour without a special leave-taking—John went away.

That was a wonderful day. In the evening we gathered as we never thought we should gather again in this world, round the family table—Guy, Edwin, Walter, Maud, Louise and William Ravenel—all changed (William Ravenel was indeed a man now), yet not one lost. A true love-feast it was, a renewed celebration of the family bond, now knitted up once more, never to be broken.

Afterwards, when Ursula grew tired, John carried her upstairs, saying that, well as she looked, she must be compelled to economize both her good looks and her happiness. When he came down again he stood talking for some time with Ravenel. I thought he looked pallid—pallid even to exhaustion. A minute or two afterwards he silently left the room.

I followed him, and found him leaning against the mantel-piece in his study.

"Who's that?" He spoke feebly; he looked ghastly.

I called him by his name.

"Come in. Fetch no one. Shut the door."

The words were hoarse and abrupt, but I obeyed.

"Phineas," he said, again holding out a hand, as if he

thought he had grieved me, "don't mind. I shall be better presently. I know quite well what it is. Oh, my God!"

Sharp, horrible pain—such as human nature shrinks from. I know now what he must have endured. He held me fast, half unconscious as he was. After a few minutes the worst suffering abated. I got him some water, as I had done when he had been seized by that other and less painful attack on the day of Edwin's wedding. He drank, and let me bathe his face—his face, grey and deathlike—John's face!

But I am telling the bare facts—nothing else.

A few heavy sighs, gasped as it were for life, and he was himself again.

"Thank God, it is over. Phineas, you must try and forget what you have seen."

"What is it?"

"There is no need for alarm, my brother. I have had other attacks. It is a horrible pain while it lasts; I can hardly bear it. But it goes away again, as you see. It would be a pity to tell my wife, or anybody; in fact, I had rather not. You understand?"

He spoke in a matter of fact way, as if he thought his explanation would satisfy me, and prevent my asking further. He was mistaken.

"John, what is it?"

"I had rather not talk of it, Phineas. Pray forget it."

But I could not; nor, I thought, could he. He took up a book and sat still; though oftentimes I caught his eyes fixed on my face with a peculiar earnestness, as if he would fain test my strength—fain find out how much I loved him, and loving, how much I could bear.

"You are not reading, John; you are thinking—what about?"

He paused a little, then said: "About your father. Do you remember how he died?"

I shuddered. "Yes, but why talk of it now?"

"Why not? I have often thought what a happy death it was—sudden, instantaneous, without any wasting sickness

beforehand. Phineas, your father's was the happiest death I ever knew."

"It may be—I am not sure. John, why do you say this to me?"

He looked at me across the table—steadily, eye to eye, as if he would fain impart to my spirit the calmness that was in his own. "I believe, Phineas, when I die, my death will be not unlike his. I have long known that I had this disease."

"Disease!"

"Yes. I have known it for a certainty ever since I was in Paris. But it is nothing to be afraid of. I may live ten or twenty years, and die of another illness after all."

"Were you ill in Paris? You never said so."

"No; because—Phineas, do you think you can bear the truth? You know it will make no real difference. I shall not die an hour the sooner for being aware of it."

"Aware of what? Say quickly."

"Dr. K—— told me—I was determined to be told—that I had the disease I suspected, beyond medical power to cure. It is not immediately fatal. He said I might live many years, even to old age, and that I might die suddenly, just as your father died. Phineas!"

I felt the warm pressure of his hand on my shoulder. "Yes, John?"

"We have known each other these forty years. Is our love, our faith so small, that either of us, for himself or his brother, need be afraid of death?"

I bowed my head.

"Phineas, no one knows but you. She—my wife—has not the least idea of it." His voice failed. "It has been terrible to me at times, the thought of her. Perhaps I ought to have told her. Often I resolved I would and then changed my mind. Latterly, since she has been ill, I have believed, almost hoped, that she would not need to be told at all."

"Would you rather, then, that she——"

John calmly took up the word that I had been afraid of uttering. "Yes, I would rather of the two that she went first."

She would suffer less, and it would be such a short parting. Does it pain you, my talking thus? Because, if so, we will cease."

"No, go on."

"That is right. I thought, this attack having been somewhat worse than the last, someone ought to be told. It has been a great comfort to me to tell you—a great comfort, Phineas. Always remember that."

I have remembered it.

CHAPTER XX

FRIDAY, the first of August, 1834.

Many remember that day. What a soft, grey summer morning it was, and how it broke into brightness; how everywhere bells were ringing, club fraternities walking with bands and banners, school children having feasts, and work people holidays; how in town and country, there was spread a general rejoicing—because in all the English Colonies the negro had been set free.

For John it was a day of special rejoicing. The Emancipation of the Slaves was a cause he had long worked for. On this day also we had all our young people round us. Yes, it was a happy day—ininitely happy.

After dinner John carried his wife to her chair beside the weeping-ash, where she could smell the late hay in the meadow, and hear the ripple of the stream in the beech wood. Her husband sat on the grass, making her laugh with his quaint sayings—admiring her in her new bonnet, and in the lovely white shawl—Guy's shawl—which Mr. Guy himself had no time for admiring. He had gone off to the school tea-drinking, escorting his sister, his sister-in-law, and another lady, whose eyes brightened with most "sisterly" joy whenever she glanced at her old playfellow. Guy's "sister" she nevertheless was not; and I questioned whether, in his secret heart, he had not already begun to feel particularly thankful for that circumstance.

"Ah, Mother," cried the father, smiling, "you'll see how it will end. All our young birds will soon be flown; there will be no one left but you and me."

"Never mind, John," and stooping over him she kissed him softly. "Never mind. Once there were only our two selves—now there will be only our two selves again. We shall be very happy. We need only one another."

"Only one another, my darling."

The last word, and the manner of his saying it, I can still hear. The last sight—of them sitting under the ash tree, hand in hand, I can still see.

I sat for some time in my room; then John came to fetch me for our customary walk along his favourite "terrace" on the Flat. There, almost every evening, we used to spend an hour or more pacing up and down, or sitting in that little hollow under the brow of the Flat, from which, as from the topmost seat of a natural amphitheatre, one could see Rose Cottage, our own green garden gate, the dark mass of the beech wood, and far away beyond that, Nunneley Hill, where the sun went down.

To-day, having walked less time than usual, for the evening was warm, and it had been a fatiguing day, John and I sat down together. We talked a little, ramblingly, chiefly of Longfield, where he and Ursula meant soon to retire, leaving Guy as master of the big house.

"You will have your old room again, Phineas," said he, "and a new nursery is to be planned for the grandchildren. We can't get out of the way of children, I see clearly," he added laughing. "We shall have Longfield just as full as ever it was all summer-time, when they come to stay with us. But in winter we'll be quiet, and sit by the chimney-corner and plunge into my dusty desert of books—eh, Phineas? You shall help me to make notes for those lectures I have intended giving at Norton Bury these ten years past. And we'll rub up our old Latin, and dip into modern poetry—great rubbish, I fear. Nobody like our old friend, Will of Avon, or even your namesake, worthy Phineas Fletcher."

I reminded him of the "Shepherd's life and fate" which he always liked so much, and used to say was his ideal of peaceful happiness.

"Well, and I think so still. 'Keep true to the dreams of thy youth,' said the old German. I have not been false to mine. I have had a happy life, thank God—ay, and what few men can say, it has been the very sort of happiness I myself would have chosen."

He sat, talking thus, resting his chin on his hand, his eyes, calm and sweet, looking out westward, where the sun was about an hour from the horizon.

"Do you remember how we used to lie on the grass in your father's garden, and how we could never catch the sunset except in fragments between the Abbey trees. I wonder if they keep the yew hedge clipped as round as ever."

I told him Edwin had said to-day that some strange tenants were going to make an inn of the old house, and turn the lawn into a bowling green.

"What a shame! I wish I could prevent it. And yet, perhaps not," he added after a silence. "Ought we not to submit to the universal law of change? how each in his place is fulfilling his day and passing away, just as that sun is passing?"

Almost before he had done speaking, a whole troop of our young people came out of Mrs. Tod's cottage, and nodded to us from below. There was Mrs. Edwin, talking to the good old soul, who admired her baby boy very much, but wouldn't allow that there could be any children like Mrs. Halifax's children. There was Edwin, deep in converse with his brother Guy, while beside them—prettier and younger-looking than ever—Grace Oldtower was making a posy for little Louise.

Further down the slope, walking slowly, side by side, evidently seeing nobody but themselves, were another couple.

"I think sometimes, John, that those two, William and Maud, will be the happiest of all the children."

He smiled, looked after them a minute, and then laid himself down on the slope, his eyes directed towards the sunset. I saw him pull his broad straw hat over his face, and compose himself, hands clasped across his breast, in the attitude of sleep. I knew he was very tired, so I spoke no more, but threw my cloak over him. He looked up, thanked me silently, with his old familiar smile. I sat half an hour or more watching the sun sink lower and lower. Then I saw

Maud and William coming up the slope. I beckoned to them not to disturb the father; and they sat down in silence beside us.

"How cold it has grown," said Maud at last. "I think we ought to wake my father."

She went up to him, laid her hand on his—drew back startled—alarmed.

"Father!"

I put the child aside. It was I who moved the hat from John's face—the face—for John himself was far, far away. While he was sleeping thus the Master had called him to him.

His two sons carried him down the slope. They laid him in Mrs. Tod's cottage. Then I went home to tell his wife.

She was at last composed, as we thought, lying on her bed, deathlike almost, but calm. It was ten o'clock. I left her with all her children watching round her.

I went out, up to Rose Cottage, to sit an hour by myself alone, looking at him I should not see again for—as he had said—"a little while".

"A little while—a little while." I comforted myself with those words, as I gazed at the face of him who had been more than brother to me. On this same bed Muriel had died. How strange a chance it was, I thought, that had brought her father's body to rest there. I was roused by a hand touching my shoulder. It was Ursula.

How she came I know not; nor how she had managed to steal out from among her children; nor how she, who had not walked for weeks, had found strength to make her way up hither, in the dark, all alone. She stood, upright and calm, gazing—gazing as I had done.

"It's very like him, don't you think so, Phineas?" The voice was low and soft, and unbroken by any sob. "He once told me, in case of—this, he would rather I did not come and look at him; but I can, you see."

I gave her my place, and she sat down by the bed, Then for ten minutes we remained thus, without exchanging a word.

"I think I hear someone at the door. Brother, will you call in the children."

Guy, altogether overcome, knelt down beside his mother, and besought her to let him take her home.

"Presently—presently, my son; you are very good to me; but—your father. Children, come in and look at your father."

They all gathered round her—weeping; but she shed not a single tear.

"I was a girl younger than any of you, when I first met your father. Next month we shall have been married thirty-five years. Thirty-five years."

Her eyes grew dreamy, as if fancy had led her back all that space of time.

"Children, we were so happy, you cannot tell. He was so good; he loved me so. Better than that, he made me good; that was why I loved him. We were more precious to each other than anything on earth; except His service, who gave us to one another. Guy, Edwin, all of you, you must never forget your father. You must love him, and love one another, and live as he lived—in all ways."

As they hung round her neck she kissed them all—her three sons and her daughter, one by one; then, her mind being perhaps led astray by the room we were in, looked feebly round for one more child—remembered—smiled.

"How glad her father will be to have her again—his own little Muriel."

"Mother! Mother darling! come home," whispered Guy, almost in a sob.

"Presently, presently. Now go away all of you; I want to be left a little while, alone with my husband."

As we went out I saw her turn towards the bed. "John! John!" Just a low murmur, like a tired child creeping to fond protecting arms.

We closed the door. We all sat on the stairs outside. For a long time no one spoke. At last Guy went softly in.

She was still in the same place by the bedside, half lying on the bed. Her arm was round her husband's neck; her face, pressed inwards towards the pillow, was nestled close to his hair. They might have been asleep—both of them.

One of her children called her, but she neither answered nor stirred.

Guy lifted her up very tenderly; his mother, who had no stay left but him—his mother—a widow——

No, thank God! she was not a widow now.

THE END

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John Halifax was first published in 1857, when its author (then Miss Mulock) was thirty-one years old. Mrs. Craik, daughter of a somewhat eccentric Nonconformist minister in Stoke-on-Trent, came to London when she was twenty, determined to make her living by her pen. She soon established herself as a writer of stories for children, for whom most of her books were written. She wrote about twenty adult novels, though none achieved the great success of *John Halifax*. This placed her in the front rank of contemporary women novelists. In 1864, she married Mr. G. L. Craik, a partner in Macmillan's the publishers. With him she moved to Shortlands in Kent, where the rest of her life was passed in quiet happiness and literary industry. A pension of £60 a year, which was granted to her in the year of her marriage, was set aside for the use of less fortunate authors.

From the Editor's Introduction.